

How Dunmatt Farms Improved Animal Care

Lessons learned from Ontario dairy farmers



Ottawa Region, Ontario



Located just outside of Ottawa, Dunmatt Farm is a 200-cow dairy farm nestled in Dunvegan, Ontario. The operation began 30 years ago when Josef and Karin Odermatt emigrated from Switzerland to Canada. Dunmatt Farm started out as a tie-stall operation with only 30 cows and has since grown to be a much larger free stall operation run by Rony Odermatt, his parents, Josef and Karin, and his sister, Sharon. With a number of expansions and renovations added to the facility over the years, Rony is proud of the progress that he and his family have made towards improving cow comfort, while always keeping animal welfare at the forefront.

As an Ontario dairy farmer, Rony participates in the proAction program and receives regular on-farm assessments like all other farmers across Canada. Dunmatt Farm was identified as a farm that showed substantial improvement in reducing lameness in their herd over 2 proAction assessments. Here are some of Rony's perspectives on animal care as an Ontario dairy farmer and the on-farm changes his family made to improve the health of their dairy herd.

A Philosophy for Animal Care.

When it comes to animal care, the Odermatts' philosophy is that if you take care of your cows, they will take care of you. Providing better care to the animals translates to increased production and improved longevity, with Rony noting that if you don't prioritize cow comfort, you won't have old cows in the herd and it will be difficult to be profitable. Cow comfort and animal care have always been a top priority for Rony and his family. Over the years, they have expanded their farm with additions in 2004, 2008, and 2018 to build a facility that caters to the health and welfare of their animals.

Assessing Animal Care On-Farm.

Since he worked so closely with the herd and already had an idea of where improvements could be made, Rony wasn't fazed when he learned that they would have to participate in a proAction Animal Care Assessment in 2018. In fact, he feels that the assessments are a good opportunity to see where your herd is at and having another perspective can be helpful to identify areas for improvement. Like many Canadian dairy farmers, Rony is

very involved in his herd. When the proAction assessor pointed out some issues with lameness, Rony says he agreed with her assessment and was motivated to identify goals to work towards once he received the results. During his first assessment, the Odermatt family was in the process of building an extension on the barn. They knew that they had a few issues that could be fixed with the new addition; however, they were focused on improving cow comfort in the short term and made some additional on-farm changes to address this.

Engaging Trusted Advisors.

As Rony put it, when there's a problem, there is usually a straightforward solution for most things. So, he and his family got to work trying to find solutions for the lameness cases on the farm. Rony began by talking with some of their key advisors – specifically, the veterinarian, hoof trimmer, and nutritionist. Having a team of trusted advisors is critical to helping identify the root cause of on-farm problems. Advisors interact with a lot of different farmers, and

farming systems, so they are able to provide a different perspective or share ideas of things that worked well for other farmers. Rony's advisors know that he wants to be proactive, so they point out issues when they see them and they help him narrow down potential solutions. He also talked with other farmers in his area about what worked, or didn't work, for them, to help give him some ideas of where to start.

Focusing in on the Feet.

The frequency of the hoof trimming in the herd was increased from every 6 months to every 5 months^a.

Rony noticed that as the cows got to the 6-month point, they were already starting to show issues. So, getting trimmed a bit earlier helped him be proactive and prevented that problem from occurring in the first place. He noticed that by doing this, his cows could make an extra lactation in the herd when they weren't able to before. While they had previously used foot baths on some level, Rony knew they weren't consistent with it. So, they also implemented a consistent foot bathing system three times per week as a preventative measure, which he feels has helped their herd immensely.

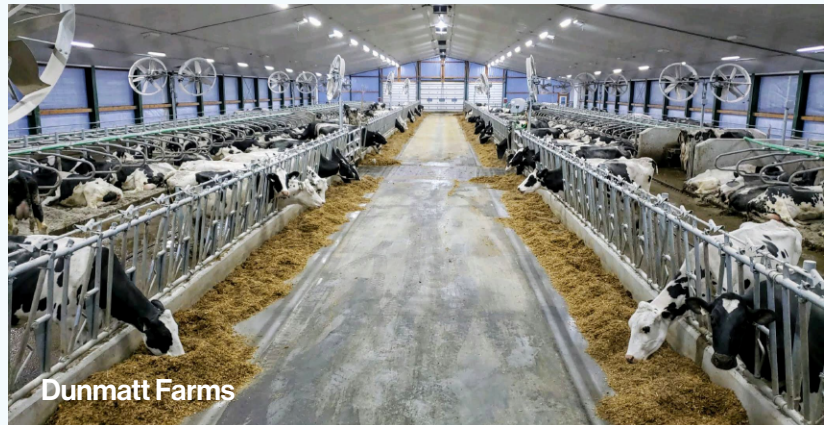
Digging Into Bedding.

Stall comfort was another area that Rony felt could be improved. Prior to the assessment, they had been using stall mats that were quite thin and not very comfortable. **They made the decision to take the mats out and transition to a deep bedding system^b.** While it took a bit of trial and error, they eventually found the right way to make the deep bed system work well for their farm. Rony says that after switching to deep beds, they gained 4L in milk production, and once they started milking three times per day instead

of two, they gained 6L. Rony was incredibly happy with the improvements he saw in cow comfort, health, and production from changing the bedding system. He now has a community of farmers in the local area that are also using deep beds and seeing great results.

It Takes a Team.

When working to solve on-farm problems, Rony and his family consulted their team of advisors, as well as other farmers, to help them make decisions. When asked what advice he would share with other farmers going through the same situation, Rony said *"Sometimes you think you're the only one with that problem but it's not really true. Every farmer has a problem that they have overcome"*. Rony feels that in order to improve your herd, you need to make a team of advisors, specialists, and other farmers. Advisors can be helpful in making connections with other farmers in the community that have different systems, or that have very good outcomes on their own farms. For Rony and his family, cow comfort has, and always will be, a top priority and they are prepared to continue working towards this with the help of their advisors and fellow farmers.



Decisions supported by science.

- The frequent use of foot baths, as well as routine preventative and corrective hoof trimming, are key strategies to prevent lameness.
- Rubber flooring and deep-bedded stalls improves hoof cushioning and traction, which is a preventative approach for lameness

Statements are supported by the Lameness and Injuries section of the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle: Review of Scientific Research on Priority Issues. 2020.

Funded and Supported by

