

How Hawthorne Valley Farms Improved Animal Care

Lessons learned from Ontario dairy farmers



Timmins, Ontario



This case study was written based on an interview with a dairy farmer in Northern Ontario. Names and specific farm details have been modified for confidentiality.

Richard and Evelyn Johnson own and operate Hawthorne Valley Farm, a 100 cow dairy farm in Timmins, Ontario. Their hybrid operation utilizes a combination of free stalls and tie-stalls for their herd. The farm is equipped with a pipeline system and has room for 120 cows. Richard and Evelyn were originally farming in South Western Ontario; however, when they wanted to expand the farm, they moved North and built a new farming facility. Three years later, Richard and Evelyn operate their new business with a focus on prioritizing animal care and welfare.

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

Animal Care is a No Brainer.

For Richard, animal care and prioritizing cow comfort is simply ingrained in his way of thinking. He believes that if you take care of your cows, they will take care of you in return, meaning that improved cow comfort leads to increased production and a successful farm. Initially, Richard had hesitations about the work that would be involved with a proAction Animal Care Assessment but when reflecting on his experience, he felt that it wasn't too stressful or difficult. Having a second set of eyes on his herd was helpful and the process of discussing his herd health with the assessor wasn't difficult.

Building a Barn Around Animal Care.

Richard already knew that there were areas of improvement on his farm. So, when the assessment revealed that there were hock and neck injuries in his herd, he wasn't very surprised. He knew that this was an area that they struggled with and since his family was already planning to move to a new farm, he saw this as an opportunity to improve the care and welfare of his herd.

From March to September 2020, the Johnsons worked to build their new barn. To get inspiration for their new facility, they spoke with their veterinarian, hoof trimmer, stabling and ventilation experts, and contractors. They also visited a number of other dairy barns in the area, getting ideas from neighbours and other farmers. In their old facility, Richard knew that **the neck rails in his stalls^a** were too low and that the mats were thin, worn out, and needed improving. When designing the new barn, Richard kept these areas in mind. **The new facility was built to have wider stalls and new, better mats^b.**

Decisions supported by science.

- Positioning tie rails or the neck rails further away from the curb makes in-stall movement easier for cattle and has been associated with decreased injuries and lameness.
- Stall design has been identified as a risk factor for lameness and injuries. Wider stalls are associated with greater lying times, increased ease of movement, and, in the case of tie-stalls, decreased injuries and 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.

Building a Barn Around Animal Care.

The ceilings were made higher and a focus was put on improving the ventilation in the barn to make the cows more comfortable and cooler in the summer. In terms of management strategies, **Richard and his family chose to bed their stalls twice per day with both straw and shavings. They use lime to help keep things dry and make sure to scrape manure 5 to 6 times per day to keep the facility clean^c.** Between the new facility design, and the focus on improved management practices, Richard has seen a drastic improvement in his animals. The cows are healthier overall, with reduced injuries and improved cow comfort.

For Richard, going through the process of building a new barn highlighted a few key aspects of how to be successful in improving cow health, welfare, and comfort. Good communication with advisors is important and makes a big impact. Richard's vet, hoof trimmer, and nutritionist have been part of the core team helping to maximize his herd health and welfare. By utilizing the help and support of their advisors, community, and fellow dairy farmers, Richard and his family have been able to redesign their farming business in a way that positively impacts their animals and prioritizes cow comfort.

Decisions supported by science.

- c. When it comes to management practices, keeping stalls clean and dry is a critical practice for reducing the prevalence of hock injuries.

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