

How Martville Farms Improved Animal Care

Lessons learned from Ontario dairy farmers



Moose Creek, Ontario



Like many Ontario dairy farms, Martville Farms is a family-run business. The Martin family, including Sonia and Gaetan Martin, along with their 4 children Chanelle, Jeremie, Benoit, and Julianne, own and operate Martville Farms located in Moose Creek Ontario. To support Chanelle and Jeremie's desire to join the family farming business, Sonia and Gaetan made the decision to expand their operation and transition their family into a new free stall parlor barn. Now milking 100 cows, Martville Farms is large enough to support the entire Martin family and their growing ambitions as young dairy farmers.

As Ontario dairy farmers, Sonia and Chanelle participate in the proAction program and receive regular on-farm assessments like all other farmers across Canada. Martville Farms was identified as a farm that showed substantial improvement in reducing knee and hock injuries in their herd over 2 proAction assessments. Here are some of Sonia and Chanelle's perspectives on animal care as Ontario dairy farmers and the on-farm changes they made to improve the health of their dairy herd.

Animal Care as a Family and Farm Priority.

For the Martin family, their animals have always been a top priority and animal care has always been an important part of the family business. Prioritizing animal care has translated to healthier cows with higher milk production. When it came to participating in a proAction Animal Care Assessment, Sonia was initially put off by the additional paperwork that would come with an on-farm assessment. However, she found that participating in the assessment was a simple process and helped Sonia and her family identify some areas of improvement in the herd. Sonia noted that while they did fairly well on both of their previous assessments, hock and knee injuries were identified as two areas where improvement was needed.

At the time of their first assessment, Sonia and Gaetan were housing their cows in a tie-stall facility and knew that the barn design was no longer working for them. So, when the proAction results identified some issues with hocks and knees, they weren't surprised. The plan to build a new, larger barn was already in the works but they made a few changes in the tie-stall system to improve cow comfort while they prepared for the transition. **Mattresses were added to stalls to improve hock and knee injuries, and hoof trimming was increased from once a year to approximately every 6 months^a.** However, Sonia noticed the greatest improvement in their herd health and welfare when they transitioned from their tie-stall barn to the new freestall system.

Decisions supported by science.

- a. The opportunity for increased movement through less restrictive housing has health and behaviour benefits including improvements in physical fitness.

A New Barn for a Growing Family Business.

When Chanelle and Jeremie expressed interest in returning home to work on the farm, Sonia and Gaetan knew a change was in order. The family decided to expand the farm and increase their revenue to support three farming families. **They knew that a freestall system would be the best fit for their family and their cows today, as well as into the future, and began planning to transition their cows to a new barn^b.**

The transition went smoothly and Sonia and Chanelle noticed improvements in their herd right away. Hock, knee, and neck injuries were no longer a concern. **In the old barn, Sonia mentioned that almost every cow required assistance at calving. However, in the freestall system, cows are calving much easier and almost never need assistance^c.**

With more space to move around and deeper bedding, the cows were more comfortable and started producing more milk right away. It was clear to Sonia and Chanelle that their cows were happier and healthier in their new barn.

“We offer them to go outside now and they'd rather stay in the barn than go outside. They're just comfortable. They're just happy [cows]...I think it's because they get to move around and the stalls are bigger and it's deep bedding. I think those were the main things that we noticed straight away.”

Sonia Martin

Decisions supported by science.

- b. Housing designed to offer more space and incentive to move can increase cows' levels of locomotor activity, exploration, and socializing.
- c. Less restrictive housing has been shown to improve physiological outcomes including dystocia.

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.

Adjusting Along the Way.

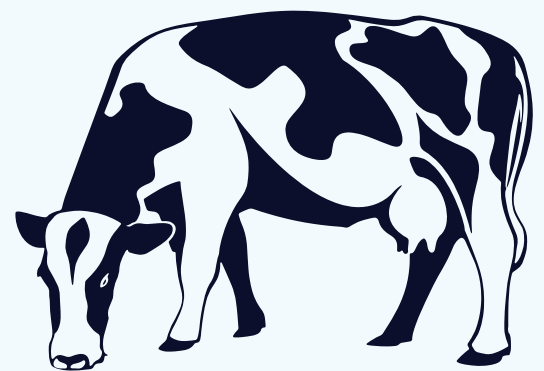
Like with any big change, some adjustments were involved with building a barn and switching to a new management system. As the new barn build was carried out, the initial plans and budget had to be expanded on to accommodate changes for improved functionality. Building a barn and transitioning to a freestall system was a learning curve for the Martins; however, Chanelle was able to get the farm set up with a new computerized record keeping system and the cows adjusted well to the new parlor milking system.

ownership to their children, Sonia and Gaetan knew it was critical to get the kids involved at the onset and include their opinions when building a barn for their future.

Despite the many things taken into consideration through this farm transition, Sonia, Chanelle and their family knew that keeping cow comfort at the forefront of their priorities was critical to the success and longevity of their business, as well as to the health and welfare of their animals.

Other Farmers are Part of the Solution.

Over the course of a year, Sonia and her children visited farms across the province to learn about different farming systems. Fellow farmers were highly influential for the Martins as they set out to design, build, and farm with a new system. To help with farm succession and the eventual transition of farm



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