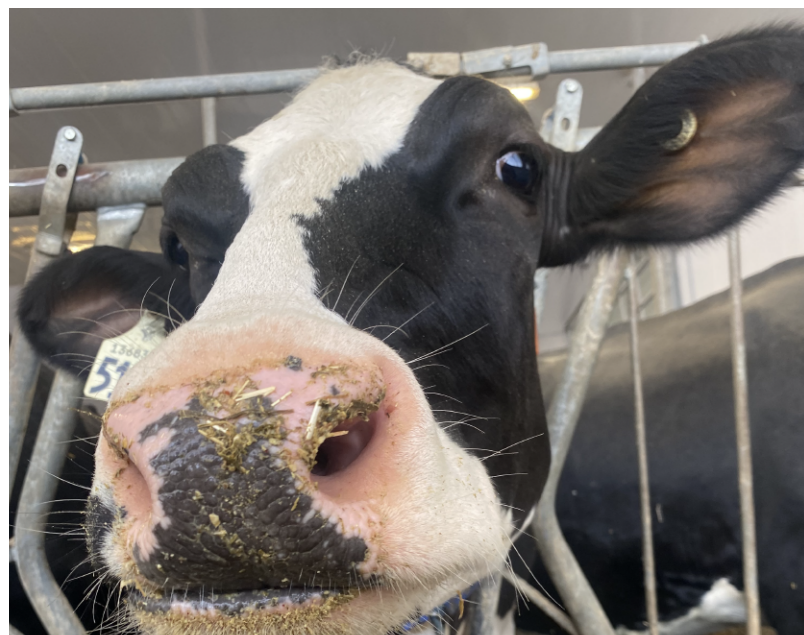


How Richford Farms Improved Animal Care

Lessons learned from Ontario dairy farmers



Saint Marys, Ontario



Richford Farms can be found in Saint Marys, Ontario, just on the edge of Zorra Township. The tie-stall farm is managed by Don and Karen Richardson, who work hard to ensure that their 45 Shorthorn cows live comfortably. In addition to his role as partner of Richford Farms, Don also participates as an executive member of the Canadian Milking Shorthorn Society. Like many Ontario dairy farmers, Don and Karen prioritize animal care in their herd and are continuously working to make sure they do the best job they can to keep their cows healthy and happy.

As an Ontario dairy farmer, Don Richardson participates in the proAction program and receives regular on-farm assessments like all other farmers across Canada. Richford Farms was identified as a farm that showed substantial improvement in reducing the lameness and hock injuries in their herd over 2 proAction assessments. Here are some of Don'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.

A Cow Comfort Philosophy and a Commitment to Improvement.

The animal care philosophy at Richford Farms is that cow comfort is, and always should be, a top priority. Don and Karen like to know that their cows are as comfortable as they can be, which Don says translates to higher milk production and fewer health problems for his herd. As many dairy farmers are, Don is highly involved in his farming operation and works closely with his cows every day. Adopting a cow comfort philosophy means keeping the wellbeing of their cows top of mind, and taking action when opportunities for improvement are identified.

Honing in on Opportunities for Improvement.

When Don first heard that he would be participating in a proAction Animal Care Assessment, he was a bit hesitant about the idea of someone coming to assess his cows. Prior to his first proAction assessment, he knew that the mats in his tie-stall barn needed to be replaced, and he was already trialing a new solution, so he wasn't very surprised when the results of his cattle assessment showed that his cows had some issues with lameness and hock injuries.

What Did He Do?

At the time of his assessment, Don was in the process of testing out 2 different cow mats to determine which brand he would go with to replace the old pasture mats he had been using. Don said he knew that the mats were the cause of his herd health challenges because the cows with the worst mats had the worst hock scores, and when he tried new mats in a few of his stalls, those cows showed improvements. **After some trial and error, he found new mats that worked well and began the process of changing his stalls over to the new mats and adding more straw bedding on top^a.**

Decisions supported by science.

- a. One of the most critical practices associated with lower prevalence of hock injuries is to ensure that stalls have sufficient bedding.

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.

Cost and Return on Investment.

The process of switching his 45 cow tie-stall barn over to new mats was an investment. The cost to rent a disposal bin for the old mats was about \$500 and the transition cost was about \$130 per stall. It took about 2 months to make the transition but Don did all of the labor himself, saving about \$25 per hour in cost. The return on investment was definitely worth the price for Don, since he noticed right away that having new stall mats for his cows made a world of difference.

With new mats in their stalls, Don said his cows showed improvements right away^b. For cows that had been previously housed on the old mats, they were immediately more comfortable and were laying down for longer periods of time on their new bedding system. After about 3–6 months, Don noticed other improvements too, such as the hair growing back on his cows' hocks, which told him that the new mats were doing their job! Fresh heifers that started out on the new mats didn't have any issues with hock injuries, or lameness, showing Don that the new stall mats were making a difference and improving cow comfort right from the start.

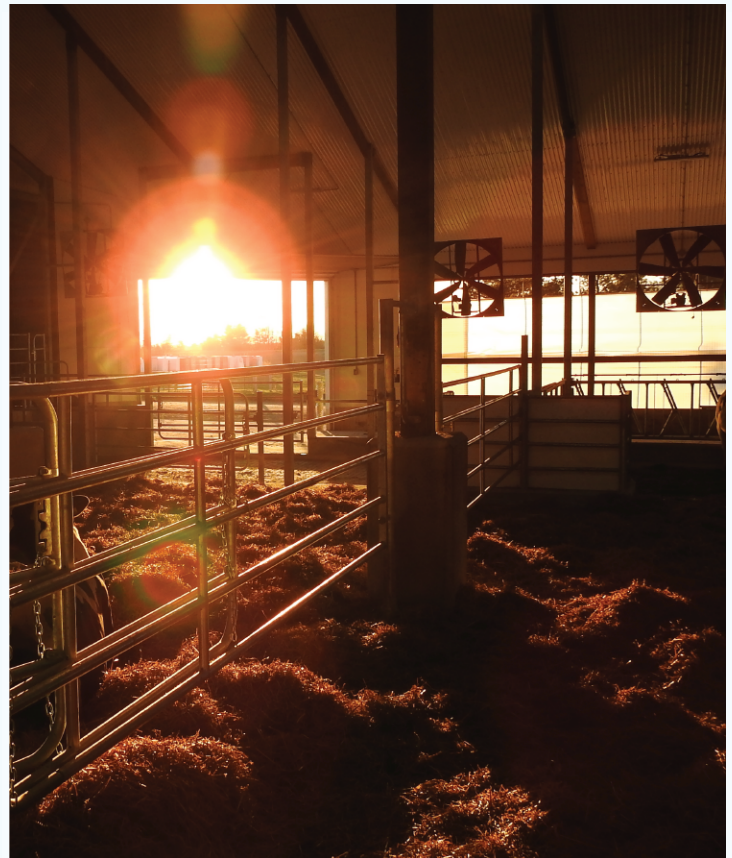
Lessons Learned.

The changes that Don experienced in his herd weren't a surprise, since he made a strategic and well-researched choice to update his stalls and he was fairly confident that the new mats would work well for his cows. While expected, Don still felt that the positive results in cow health, welfare, and comfort seen across his herd were very rewarding. After making changes to his herd, and seeing those changes pay off, Don is happy with the progress that has been made and looks at his operation a little differently now. Don says this experience has taught him to be more critical of his own operation and that having another set of eyes to assess things on your farm is worthwhile to help you realize the importance of some issues that you might not have prioritized before.

When we asked Don what advice he would share with his fellow farmers, he said,

“As hard as it is to do, be very critical of your own operation... sometimes you need to get outside eyes to take a look at your situation to really pinpoint what the root of the problem is. Vets are always good ones to consult.”

Don and Karen take a lot of pride in their herd and do their best every day to keep their cows healthy and happy. Dairy farming certainly doesn't come without its challenges, but with a focus on cow comfort and an eye towards continuous improvement, Richford Farms is a great example of how addressing on-farm challenges can be the key to finding opportunities for improvement.



Decisions supported by science.

- a. Improving hoof cushioning and traction by adding rubber flooring and deep-bedded stalls is a key preventative approach for lameness.

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