

How Soniusfield Farms Improved Animal Care

Lessons learned from Ontario dairy farmers



Ingersoll, Ontario



Mike Bardoel is a second generation dairy farmer, who owns and operates Soniusfield Farms, a 150 cow dairy farm located in Ingersoll, Ontario. The cows are housed in deep sand bedded free stalls and the facility uses a robot milking system. Mike, his wife, and three young children are proud of their growing business and strive to keep animal care as a top priority day to day.

As an Ontario dairy farmer, Mike participates in the proAction program and receives regular on-farm assessments like all other farmers across Canada. Soniusfield 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 Mike'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.

At Soniusfield Farms, Mike knows that prioritizing animal care will not only improve the health and welfare of his herd, but also increase farm profitability. By taking care of his animals, keeping them healthy, comfortable, and well-bred, Mike feels that his cows will be more productive and his business more profitable. Sometimes though, a second set of eyes on your herd can help identify priority issues on your farm that you might have overlooked. For Mike, this was the case with his proAction assessment. While he already knew that there were some improvements to be made with hock injuries, knee injuries, and lameness, participating in a proAction Animal Care Assessment helped bring those issues to the forefront.

Making a Decision to Expand

During the time of his assessment, Mike and his family were already in the process of building a new barn. The old facility was overcrowded and they felt they were better off building a new barn as the cow-comfort limitations in the old barn could not be overcome. The assessment was a great opportunity to

learn about priority areas and opportunities for improvement that could be made with the new facility. Mike toured other dairy facilities and spoke with advisors, such as his veterinarian and nutritionist, to get a better understanding of what would work best for the new barn. **When touring other facilities, he noticed that cows tended to have fewer hock injuries on sand rather than mattresses, and this was a big factor in helping him decide to put in deep sand bedded stalls^a.**

"For the new barn, deep bedded sand was a no brainer for us, it is so much better for the hocks and the knees".

Mike Bardoel

Decisions supported by science.

- Deep bedding with organic material or sand is consistently associated with lower levels of hock injuries compared to mattresses.

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.

Bigger, Better Free Stalls

With some good help, the transition to the new facility was quite smooth and the cows were almost entirely switched over to robot milking within a few weeks. As with most big changes, there were a few areas to figure out at the start, but once things started to come together, Mike knew that building a new barn was the right decision. *“The cows thrived in the new barn...they had space, bigger, better free stalls. It was more comfortable for them.”* Within the first 6 months, Mike saw noticeable improvements in his herd. Milk production increased by 2L per cow, lying time and rumination increased, fewer cows were experiencing issues with lameness, and they no longer had issues with hock injuries. **With the new design, fewer cows were slipping and falling on the improved flooring, and the overall environment was more calm since cows were going to milk individually at the robot and there was no need to move large groups of animals at once^b.**

A Different Mindset with Crossbred Cows

In addition to the facility and management changes that Mike implemented in his new barn, he also looked to breeding and genetics to improve his herd. Around a decade ago, Mike embarked on the journey to transition his herd from pure-bred Holsteins to crossbred cows. Today, his entire herd is made up of ProCROSS cows, which is a cross between Holstein, Montbeliard, and Viking Red. While there aren't many crossbred herds in his area, and his cows look a bit more beef than dairy, Mike doesn't mind and feels that this transition made a huge improvement in the health of his herd. The transition period was long and a bit challenging, but the hard work was worth it for Mike. The longevity and profitability of his cows has increased, and his production is on-par with the other robot herds in his area. Overall, the big changes, as well as the small changes, made over the years have made a tremendous improvement in the health, welfare, and productivity of his herd.

Make it Easy

In addition to owning and operating the farm, Mike also does all of the trimming for his cows, so he knew that they were struggling with digital dermatitis in the old facility. Setting up a good system in the old barn for

foot bathing was a challenge. **With the opportunity to build fresh, designing a facility that made routine footbathing easy was a priority^c.** When they transitioned to the new barn, Mike began footbathing aggressively to get the digital dermatitis under control. This, along with the other improvements made, worked like a charm! For Mike, the improvement in the health of his animals after moving to the new facility was almost immediate and he was very pleased to see that his cows seemed happier in their new environment.

Perspectives Gained from Advisors

While the decision to build a new barn was the right one for Mike and his family, he recognizes that this isn't always the case for farmers looking to improve animal care: *“The easy answer is build a new barn, but that is definitely not in the cards for everybody”.* When considering what he would recommend for other farmers, Mike highlights the importance of leaning on advisors for their guidance, perspective, and as an informational resource. Veterinarians, nutritionists, and hoof trimmers see many different farms in their day-to-day work, so chatting with them about what they've seen work well for other farmers is a great way to learn about your options. Taking the time to walk around the farm and talk with his advisors allowed Mike the opportunity to discuss their thoughts, as well as his own, for areas of improvement on his farm. Improving animal care, health, and welfare is a journey and one that Mike continues to strive for every day.

Decisions supported by science.

- b. Good floor traction is a preventative approach for lameness and low-stress handling is associated with fewer injuries.
- c. Footbaths have been shown to be effective in controlling digital dermatitis. It is important for the footbath to be long enough (recommended at least 3 meters long) for the cows' feet to be adequately submerged.

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