

How Wittekind Jersey Farm Improved Animal Care

Lessons learned from Ontario dairy farmers



Delta, Ontario



Wittekind Jersey Farm is owned and operated by the Baumann family. Reinhard and Brigitte Baumann immigrated from Germany in 1982 and purchased the dairy farm; today, it is managed by their sons Eric and Andreas, while Brigitte remains firmly involved in the operation as well. In 2020, a new pack barn was constructed to better accommodate the family and their herd's evolving needs. Today, Wittekind Jersey Farm is home to about 45 Jersey cows that live on a pack bedded system with an automated milking system (AMS).

As an Ontario dairy farmer, Eric Baumann participates in the proAction program and receives regular on-farm assessments like all other farmers across Canada. Wittekind Jersey Farm was identified as a farm that showed substantial improvement in reducing hock injuries in their herd over 2 proAction assessments. Here are some of Eric'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 Facility Change Emphasizing Freedom of Movement.

At Wittekind Jersey Farm, improving cow longevity is a particular goal, so they work to provide an environment that allows their cows to live and age well. The Baumanns value providing freedom of choice for their cows as an important part of animal welfare, which is why when the time came to build a new barn, they chose to move away from a tie-stall facility and go with a pack bedded system and a robot milker. In this new facility, their cows have the ability to choose how they would like to spend their time, with the option of going outdoors when they want to in the summer months.

Taking Action to Address Injuries.

Prior to building this new facility, Wittekind Jersey Farm was set up as a tie-stall system. In more recent years, however, Eric noticed that his cows were having some issues with hock and knee injuries. This was also identified in his proAction cattle assessment. It was time to take action. **His first priority was to improve stall comfort by changing the cow's bedding and stall management practices^a.** Previously bedding with straw, they moved towards chopped straw to increase

comfort, bedded dirty cows more frequently to improve cleanliness, and added shavings to improve moisture absorption. Of all the improvements to make on his farm, Eric found that changing his bedding strategy was the easiest and most cost effective (about \$1 more per cow per week). At the time, they were unable to make substantial changes to their stall design or renovate their facility, so changing their stall management practices was a good, low-cost option as a first place to start. In addition to adjusting the bedding, Eric highlighted that over the last 10 years he has been focusing on improving his breeding program to prioritize hoof and leg health in his cows. He felt that this made a substantial improvement in his herd but it was definitely a more time-consuming and longer-term strategy compared to changing out the bedding in his stalls.

Decisions supported by science.

- a. Bedding type and depth have been associated with a decreased risk of lameness and hock injuries. Deep bedding is a key preventative factor for hock 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.

Benefits and Return on Investment Following Facility Redesign.

In terms of his advice or sentiments for other dairy farmers, Eric's number one recommendation would be to prioritize the health and welfare of close-up, fresh, and calving cows. While not a change that he made related to specifically improving hocks or knees in his herd, the family decided to build a modest addition to the tie-stall for better management of close-up cows, this facility included a new calving pen. This addition allowed his cows to socialize and adjust to their new group prior to calving and he saw improvements with fewer incidences of milk fever, fresh cows coming into milk quicker, faster peak milk production, and better persistency. Eric felt that these changes helped to set his cows up well for lactation, kept them moving right up until calving, and helped to reduce the stress associated with the transition period. He felt that this change in his facility showed the most dramatic improvements in the health and welfare of his herd.

When the time came for Eric and his family to build a new dairy facility, they made cow comfort their top priority. Switching from a tie-stall system to a pack bedded barn was a big change, but Eric says he would do it all again in a heartbeat. Animal welfare has improved dramatically in their new barn, since the cows are free to move around all day. **Joint health and mobility have shown substantial improvements, hock and knee injuries have been reduced considerably, and hoof quality has increased dramatically with cows now being on a pack system and having outdoor access^b.**

The most immediate payback, however, was the improvements that Eric noticed in their breeding and reproduction program. Between the additional space for movement and the use of the heat detection system that came with the AMS, cows could better show when they were in heat and heats were regularly flagged, which allowed for better detection of natural

heat cycles. They strategically bred during those periods and have seen a dramatic increase in their conception and pregnancy rates. In addition to improving animal health, welfare, and productivity, Eric feels that their decision to move to an AMS has improved his own quality of life as well. Use of robots has allowed him more freedom and flexibility to choose his working hours, giving him more time with his family and making this investment worthwhile.

Making Use of Another Set of Eyes.

When asked about his experience with having a proAction assessment, Eric's initial reaction was skepticism and frustration at the amount of additional paperwork that would come along with it. However, after participating in 3 proAction assessments so far, Eric feels that it is always good to have a second set of eyes on your farm:

"It's important to recognize your strengths but it's probably more important to recognize your weaknesses so you can improve them, so that is something that I try to do my best at."

Eric Baumann

At Wittekind Jersey Farm, Eric and his family work hard to prioritize the health and welfare of their animals by focusing on continuous improvement. Eric regularly conducts his own assessments of his herd and looks for ways to improve on his own farm. He feels that while everyone experiences different areas of challenge and success, his fellow dairy farmers are working hard to do better every day and he wants to keep up with the evolving dairy industry: *"I always tell myself that as soon as you start standing still, you're going backwards."* Through prioritizing animal health and welfare in his herd, Eric has seen substantial improvements and is motivated to continue on in his journey of growth, stating *"we always strive to be more successful tomorrow than we were yesterday."*

Decisions supported by science.

- b. Access to pasture has been associated with a lower prevalence of lameness and hock injuries.

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