

ISU Extension Encourages Dairy Investment

By Larry Tranel, ISU Extension Dairy Field Specialist

Dairy is a very important industry to Dubuque and surrounding counties as many of our local communities thrive on the agri-businesses which serve them. It doesn't take long to see the negative business impact to smaller rural communities when we reduce the livestock industries surrounding it. Thus, keeping the dairy industry strong is important to all of us who live or work around the countryside. And, the new farm bill gives dairy a little incentive to consider investing into our dairy operations

Investments in Dairy Modernization

The medium sized family farm using traditional production methods is still the backbone of the dairy industry in NE Iowa. However, as dairy producers look to the future, many are investing in remodeling their operations to increase profitability, labor efficiency, working conditions, add a family member and other quality of life reasons. Some are remodeling to accommodate more cows—others just to make milking easier. ISU Extension encourages producers to focus remodeling on cost-effective ways to improve cow comfort, dry matter intake and labor efficiency.

Cow Comfort is Priority One! Shortcomings in cow comfort can be a most costly mistake. For optimum profit, a cow should be eating, drinking, milking or lying down chewing her cud. Milk quality is often related to cow comfort. A few simple changes in a stall's design can make a major impact on cow comfort in freestall or tie stall barns.

Dry Matter Intake is Priority Two! Focus on proper feed bunk design, feed quality and type, lighting, ventilation, heat abatement and good quality and quantity of water. Each pound of dry matter intake is worth 2.5 pounds of milk.

Labor Efficiency is Priority Three! If things don't flow, labor can be a time management problem. Identify and eliminate labor bottlenecks in the remodeled operation. In addition to the cash flow consider the people flow, feed flow, air flow, manure flow, cow flow, equipment flow, milk flow, water flow as well as how well it flows with the family goals and aspirations.

Beginning Dairy Farmer Investments

Now may be a great time to encourage those considering dairy as a career to get started. The new farm bill has given dairy a bit of stability and assistance for some farm price protection in addition to the beginning farmer loan programs available through the farm service agency.

ISU Extension can assist beginning dairy producers put together and financial and production management plan that focuses on lower cost-effective methods with minimal amounts of equipment and labor. Ideas such as rent & buy feed dairying; low-cost parlor technology in remodeled dairy barns; management intensive grazing; and other creative methods have assisted beginning dairy producers get into the business and have a nicer quality of lifestyle to go with it.

So, with the new farm bill giving some price stability, those considering new investment into their dairy operation are encouraged to utilize ISU Extension resources on proper designs for remodeling and assisting producers develop a plan to improve both profit and quality of life in their dairy operation.

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Remodeling Dairy Barns

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Remodeling dairy barns to a parlor and holding area has made sense to many producers. With limited financial resources available, it is recommended to spend available resources on cow comfort, dry matter intake and labor efficiency priorities first. Typically, this means putting resources towards a well designed remodeled dairy tie stall or freestall barn as that's where the cows spend most of their time.

Although many producers are very successfully converting tie stall barns into a parlor, not all tie stall barn make good remodeling projects. But, there are many advantages to consider this option first.

- The milk house system is already in place adjacent to the remodeled parlor.
- Cost savings on the parlor could allow proper investment into the freestall facility.
- If designed correctly, cow flow and milking efficiency need not be sacrificed contrary to some opinions.
- Parlors in retrofitted barns have been built for under \$1,000 per stall without milking equipment included.
- Swing units can be employed initially by using present 2" line double-looped with 2% slope to incorporate a double eight swing style parlor.
- Many stall barns are sized to handle a double 8 parlor with holding area for a 120 cow herd.
- The payback of a parlor in labor savings (time and back/knee bends) can be rapid if it saves an extra person milking.
- Labor savings could make a low cost parlor cost effective even if only used for several years in a transition phase.

Compare this option to staying with the present operation or building a new parlor. ISU Extension can walk through various remodeling options with producers on their operations to assist the profit and quality of life goals of dairy families.

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