

Easy access to low cost parlor information may “TRANSform” dairy industry

By Kelli Boylen
Staff writer

DUBUQUE, Iowa – Larry Tranel has been quite busy lately, making “virtual” farm visits.

Tranel, Iowa State University Extension Dairy Specialist, has compiled the best of the knowledge he has gained building low cost milking parlors, applied internet technology to his presentation and is sharing it with the world.

Larry Tranel
ISU Extension Dairy Specialist

After being personally involved with the building of four low cost parlors, Tranel feels his plans are ready to be shared.

Tranel’s TRANS Iowa Low Cost Parlor design can be used to create parlors in most tie-stall barns for \$20,000 to \$25,000.

Tranel says the name TRANS relates to the transformation that could occur on individual farms and with the industry as a whole.

Tranel first learned about low-cost parlors during a visit to New Zealand in 1994. “The entire industry there was wrapped around the low-cost parlor idea and I became very interested in learning how dairy producers could do it themselves.”

Using a concept similar to an Amish barn raising, neighbors and family members can work together to install a low cost parlor in less than a week. Tranel knows this for a fact because he has done it.

While working for the University of Wisconsin Extension, Tranel developed an initial low-cost parlor design and thousands of copies were shared with interested producers.

When Tranel came to work for Iowa State University Extension, he learned that 75 percent of the dairy farms in Northeast Iowa housed their cows in tie stall barns. He, and other ISU personnel figured one of the ways to help dairy producers was to get them out of tie stalls and into parlors – inexpensively.

“The first reaction usually is ‘Why didn’t I do this sooner?’” says Tranel. “They can’t believe how much easier milking is on their backs and knees.”

He adds that a comment he has also heard is that after milking in a parlor, the farmers don’t feel like they physically did anything.

He had made numerous farm visits and often realized the dairy producers he was talk-

ing to had a hard time visualizing what he was talking about; thus the development of the online presentation on TRANS Iowa Low Cost Parlors.

By watching the online presentation at <http://connect.extension.iastate.edu/parlor>, complete with audio and numerous video clips, farmers can see exactly what low-cost parlors are about and see that it is not just a theory. It works and it works well.

Producers can see exactly how one person can switch out cows on one side of his parlor in 45-seconds using a chop gate, or step-by-step how a stall barn can be converted to a parlor without high expense. He even shows how his 12-year-old son could milk 60 cows per hour in a low-cost parlor.

The entire presentation is less than 45 minutes long and is easy to understand.

Tranel notes when farmers are able to see exactly how a low-cost parlor can be created, they are much more likely to do such a project on their own farm.

Tranel is willing to put his money where his mouth is, and the very first low-cost parlor he helped to build was on his own farm in Southwest Wisconsin. The second farm was the new grazing facility at the Dairy Center on the Northeast Iowa Community College Campus at Calmar. The third farm was his brothers, and then he and Dale Thoreson, another ISU dairy specialist, built one on Dale’s brother’s farm in North Dakota.

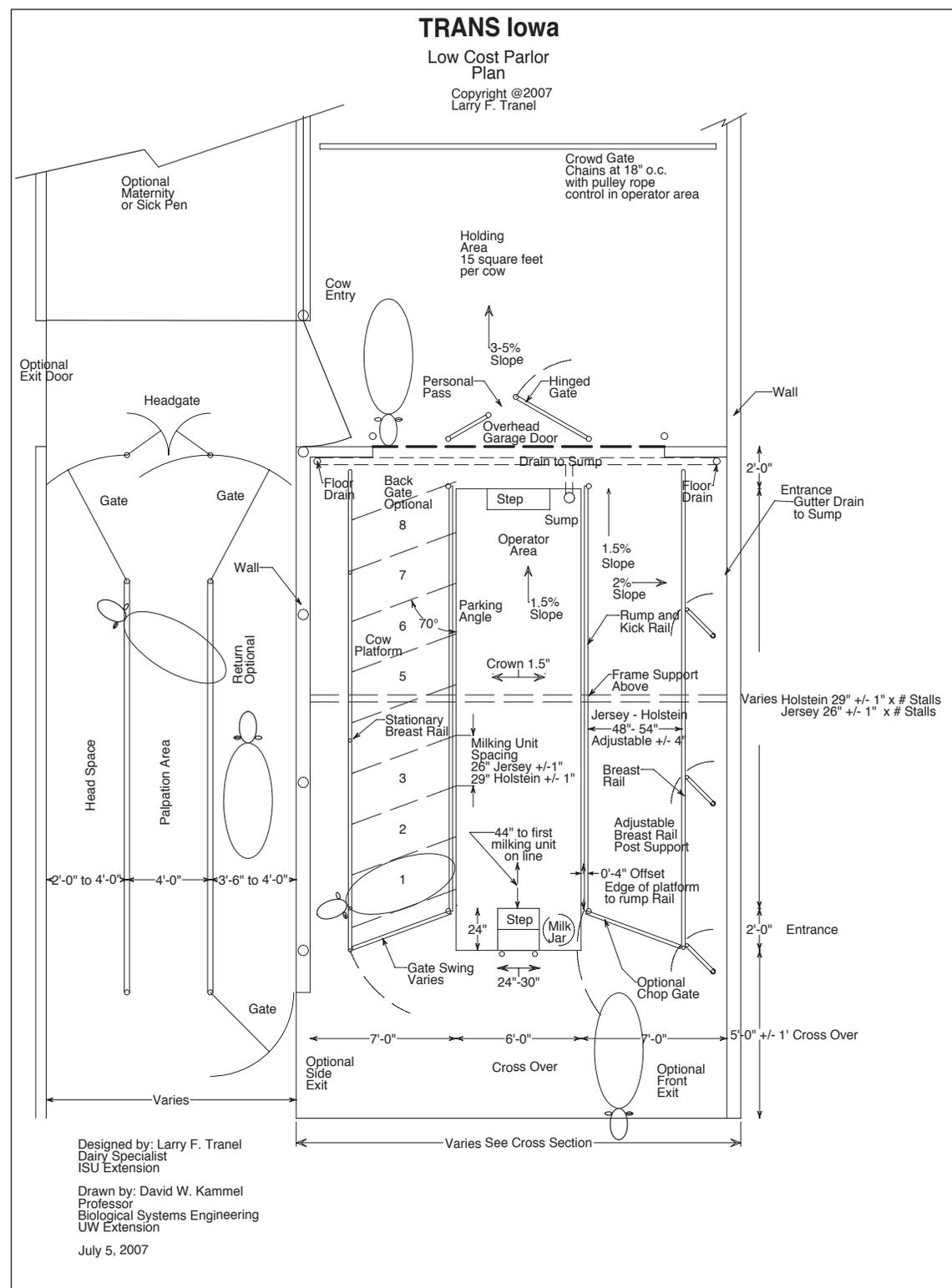
Tranel says each time he learned a little more about how to best do things and he is now satisfied enough to share the plans with anyone who has an interest. “I have the model and the blueprint down now,” he says.

The narrowest barn he has made this work in thus far was 17 feet wide, and the shortest lengthwise was a 32 stall tie-stall barn. In the 32-stall barn they managed to fit in a working Swing 8 parlor, a palpation rail and a maternity pen.

Of course the total cost of a project depends on who does the welding, lights and equipment installation, but he says the high-end cost of a low-cost parlor would be \$40,000. “For that amount you can get an extremely nice parlor.”

The usual method for starting a low-cost parlor is to reinforce, if needed, the actual structure so that no weight-bearing post are needed. The next step is to bust out the concrete in the area that will be the milking parlor, use a skidloader to dig the pit, and pour the concrete for the pit. Things quickly progress from there.

Tranel has, through hands-on construction and studying



the milkers in a low-cost parlor, calculated most details – from the manure pan and kick bar to the platform space that best suites the needs of different dairy breeds. His plans include a way to deal with stray voltage, calculations to ensure correct draining from all parlor areas, maximizing lighting for the sake of the cows and the milkers, and making sure the least possible amount of stress is on the person milking. When a parlor is properly built, the person milking should have their back straight, have good cow visibility, and no manure in the pit. Tranel has thought of all this in the plans.

Tranel says inexpensive chop gates make a big difference in the ease of use for parlors, and are part of the reason one person can milk up to 60 cows an hour. “Chop gates are the most undersold piece of equipment in the industry,” Tranel says.

Most producers find they can milk the same amount of cows in half the time when the switch from a tie-stall or stan-

chion barn to a low-cost parlor. At an investment of \$20,000, the payback on time saved with a new low-cost parlor does not take long.

Since Tranel posted the low-cost parlor presentation online, he got calls from five states within two weeks.

He may save time on his farm visits due to having laid the groundwork of understanding what low-cost parlors are all about since farmers have watched the presentation, but he is having to spend a little more time on the phone.

In addition to time saved, the presentation is already saving money on the cost of mailing information to interested persons.

Tranel worked on putting together the presentation and getting online for about 40 hours, but he did the work over two to three months.

Tranel says his goal with the presentation is to create a picture in peoples’ minds of what alternatives are out there for the Iowa dairy industry. To continue this goal, Tranel plans

on creating four more online presentations, starting with one on the possibilities and benefits of using grazing. The three remaining presentations will be on organic dairying, the Millionaire Model Farm and the Dairy TRANS financial program.

Dairy TRANS, also developed by Tranel, translates tax record data from Schedule F, combines it with a simple Net Worth Statement, and generates a very detailed and useful profit performance analysis. Cash basis records are adjusted for inventory changes to attain a true income and cost picture. Labor and capital are fully accounted for to better gain a handle on intensity of resource use regarding labor and capital investments. A break-even cost is calculated

The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture is helping to fund the project of posting all five of these presentations online.

To view the presentation, go to <http://connect.extension.iastate.edu/parlor>