Winter Housing

December 2020

We in the farming community are lucky enough to spend most of our working days outside; open to the elements, with fresh air and sunshine on your back (sometimes!), what could be better? However, during this turbulent year many people have had to endure extended periods of time indoors, or at the very least restricted in their movements and activities. So, spare a thought perhaps not only for them but also for your winter-housed cows. Lush grass and roaming the field margins are a thing long forgotten by now and it is vitally important that during the long winter months your stock is provided with an optimum environment in which to live, thrive and perform.

FOOD:

Feed space recommendations are 75cm per animal, based on an average 750kg dairy cow. Aggressive and feed disrupting behaviours have been shown to reduce by 57% following a feed face increase from 50cm to 100cm per cow. Thus, it gives subordinate and lower ranking individuals an opportunity to feed sufficiently. Dry cows ideally should have 100cm to ensure optimum intakes during the vital transition period.

Raising the feed presentation table 10cm higher than ground level will allow for increased reach, so less wastage, and reduces weight transfer and pressure on the front feet. Troughs and feed runs should be fully cleaned out. Floated concrete, plastic or ceramic tiles can all be easily cleaned. Remember that the low pH of silage will eat away at most surfaces over time leaving rough, damaged edges.

There is a 25% increase in feed activity following the delivery or presentation of fresh feed, so frequent pushing up and refreshing can dramatically improve intakes.

WATER:

All stock should have unrestricted access to fresh, clean drinking water at all times. There should be provision for 10% of any housed group to be able to drink simultaneously. A minimum of 10cm trough space per cow is recommended. On average a dairy cow will drink 3-4 times milk yield per day. Although visiting the water trough up to 7 times a day, almost 50% of water intake is consumed on completion of milking, so good cow flow and position of troughs is vital. Capacity and refill flow rates must also be considered.

LIGHT:

Natural light can and should make a significant contribution to the overall lighting scheme. Uniformity is not critical except in those areas needed, such as the parlour or foot trimming crush. However, shadows and areas of sharp light/dark transition can unnerve the flighty beast.

There is much evidence to suggest that longer daylight periods such as 16-18 hours light to 6-8 hours dark will facilitate higher feed intake and increased milk output. Conversely, exposing dry cows to a reduced photoperiod, 8 hours light to 16 hours dark, leads to an increase in prolactin receptors and greater mammary growth. This is likely to result in greater milk yields in the subsequent lactation.

AIR:

I once observed cows filling up a cubicle shed after milking where they all chose to fill up the beds nearest the far corner and where a large portion of wall had unintentionally collapsed. When asked, the stockman suggested that they enjoyed the view out across the valley. In reality, it was the clean, fresh air that they were after. With the average wind speed in the UK of 1m/sec for 95% of the year, there is the provision to use natural ventilation systems to generate the rate of air change needed. The ratio of roof outlet and side wall inlet space can be manipulated, as a rule there needs to be twice as much unrestricted inlet to outlet. Now that your houses are stocked, the use of smoke bombs can give a valuable insight as to the flow, or lack of, fresh air in, out and around your building.

SOCIAL DISTANCING:

Although (currently) not needing to socially distance, space requirements are important to the housed cow. The purpose (apart from slurry removal) of passageways in cubicle buildings is to facilitate easy movement of cows to and from the parlour. But they also provide areas of loafing in which cows can exhibit natural behaviour and normal social interaction. In longer runs of cubicles, crossovers should be placed every 20-25 cubicles, to ensure there are no bottlenecks or blind ending alleys in which lower ranking cows can become trapped and suffer the consequences of bullying. Passageways should be 3-3.4m in width to allow for cows to pass unrestricted and crossovers should be a clear 2.4m wide.

CREATURE COMFORTS:

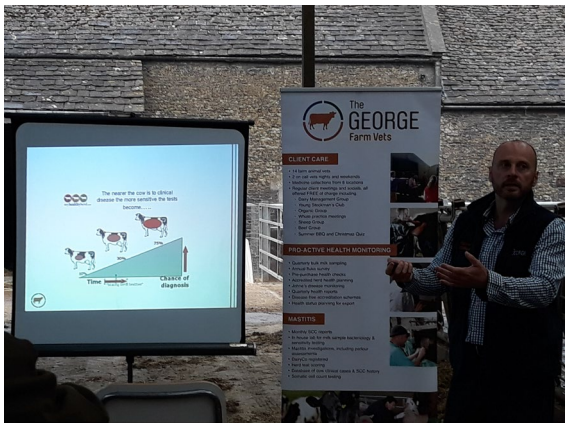
Straw is likely to be tight later, so consider bedding requirements and weigh these up against hygiene, disease control and welfare.

Beware of pools of standing water which may harbour contamination and bacteria, causing infection pressure for mastitis or digital dermatitis.

Wishing you all a very merry and well-deserved Happy Christmas!

Best wishes from all the Farm Team.

Nadolig Llawen



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