



Dairy Producers Discuss On-farm Adaptations that Meet New Code of Practice Requirements for Dairy Cattle Freedom of Movement and Pair/Group Housed Calves

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The new [Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle](#) released in 2023 includes the following requirements on dairy cow freedom of movement and pair/group housed calves:



For lactating and dry cows, "Effective April 1, 2027, cows must not be tethered continuously throughout their entire production cycle (calving to calving)—they must be provided sufficient regular opportunity for freedom of movement to promote good welfare."



For calving areas, "Effective April 1, 2029, cattle on all farms must calve in loose housed maternity pens, yards, or pastures that permit them to turn around."



For Calves housed indoors, "Effective April 1, 2031, calves that are healthy, thriving, and compatible must be housed in pairs or groups by 4 weeks of age."



Although paired/group housing is not required in outdoor-housed calves, physical contact is required for healthy calves, "Calves housed outdoors, including in hutches, must have physical contact with another calf unless they need to be separated for health reasons, or they need to be protected from inclement weather."

In a webinar held on January 21st, 2025, by Producteurs de Lait du Québec and Lactanet funded by Dairy Farmers of Canada, as part of the National Dairy Knowledge Transfer Project, the current **minimum expectations** for freedom of movement were discussed:

"Cows must have the opportunity to move freely (untethered) for at least 15% of the year (55 days) when using pasture/exercise areas, weather and conditions permitting

OR

Cows must be able to move freely (untethered) for at least 55 days per production cycle during the dry period."

Defining the duration of the exercise period to be between 1 – 24 hrs per day in both scenarios.

At the 2024 Symposium sur les bovins laitiers, a panel of three dairy producers discussed their on-farm adaptations aligned with the upcoming Code of Practice requirements regarding dairy cow's freedom of movement and pair/group housed calves. Agronomist Steve Adam, a dairy cattle comfort and welfare consultant, moderated this panel. The panellist discussed the changes they made on-farm, their motivations, the benefits, challenges, and recommendations to those looking to make similar changes on their farm.

Introducing producers and their on-farm adaptations

Producer Richard Genest, from Ferme Célijean enr., talked about expanding his barn in 2022 to house his dry, close-up, and fresh cows on a deep-bedded pack.



Picture A. Deep-bedded pack; Picture B. Pipeline in feed alley to milk fresh cows at Ferme Celjeane. Photo credit: Ferme Celjeane

Dairy facility details:

- Number of lactating cows: 90
- Tie-stall barn with a 198 x 65 ft extension for housing dry, close-up, and fresh cows on a deep-bedded pack added on in 2022
- The barn extension allows space for 53 cows
 - Pen for 16 dry cows at 125 ft²/cow lying area
 - Pen for 10 close-up cows – 130 ft²/cow
 - Pen for 27 fresh cows – 130 ft²/cow
- Fresh cows are milked in the feed alley via the rear pipeline
 - 12 cows milked at a time

Producer Sabrina Gagnon, Ferme Liégeoise senc., talked about her experience housing calves in groups with an automated milk feeder and housing close-up cows on a deep-bedded pack.



Picture A. Deep-bedded pack; Picture B. Group housing area for calves with an automated milk feeder at Ferme Liégeoise senc. Photo credit: Ferme Liégeoise senc.

Dairy facility details:

- Number of lactating cows: 125
- Tie-stall barn with automated feeding and deep-bedded pack for close-up cows added in 2018
- Calves housed individually for the first 0 - 15 days of life, then housed in groups of 2 - 8 with an automated milk feeder

Producer Ana Maria Martin, from Ferme Lorami, talked about her transition from housing calves individually tethered to group housing calves with an automated milk feeder.



*Pictures. Group housing area for calves with an automated milk feeder at Ferme Lorami.
Photo Credit: Ferme Lorami*

Dairy facility details:

- Number of lactating cows: 60
- Free-stall barn with deep-bedded sand and a robotic milking system built in 2014
- Female calves are housed indoors in two pens (450 pi² and 425 pi²)

with 6 – 7 calves per group. Female calves are fed using an automated milk feeder with two stations to prioritize the younger calf group between 7 days and 1 month of age

- Male calves are housed in individual hutches outdoors with contact among their peers

Questions to producers regarding their respective barn modifications

What motivated you to make these changes on-farm?

Richard wanted a simple design that would allow his dry, close-up, and fresh cows to be comfortable, as this transition period can be challenging for cows. He also wanted to easily milk fresh cows in the bedded-pack area, inspiring him to add a rear pipeline in the feed alley.

Sabrina noted that they had a barn fire, which pushed them to make construction decisions on the farm. They decided to try a new calf housing style with group-housed calves and an automated milk feeder. Additionally, their heifers were already housed in deep-bedded packs. Therefore, switching to housing cows close to calving in a deep-bedded pack made sense for cow comfort.

Ana switched her calves to group housing with an automated milk feeder to improve calf welfare. She also wanted a calf housing design that provided more flexibility and optimized time management.

What were the benefits related to the changes made on-farm?

Richard noted the following benefits of housing dry, close-up, and fresh cows on a deep-bedded pack:

- Improved welfare and ease of calving
- Fewer interventions are needed, allowing for more free time
- Can leave calf with the cow for 12 – 24 hours; employees check to make sure that calves are safe and nursing well from the cow

- Did not have any issues getting calves to switch from nursing on cow to bottle
- Rubber flooring in the feed alley is going well for cows moving from a tie-stall to a deep-bedded pack

Sabrina noted the following benefits of housing cows close to calving on deep-bedded packs and housing calves in groups with an automated milk feeder:

- Cows close to calving had improved welfare and ease of calving when housed on deep-bedded packs
- The automated milk feeder provided extra data to help monitor calves, for example, providing information on how much the calves drank

Ana noted the following benefits regarding group housed calves with an automated milk feeder:

- The automated milk feeder improved time and management flexibility while allowing calves to be grouped with continued good calf monitoring

What challenges were related to the changes on-farm, and what solutions were implemented?

Richard noted the following challenges and solutions with housing dry, close-up, and fresh cows on a deep-bedded pack:

- Challenge: Increased risk of mastitis for fresh cows on hot days
 - Solution: Developed a vaccination program with the veterinarian
- Challenge: Employees require training on loose-housed cow handling and milking
 - Solution: Lactanet came to provide training
- Challenge: Adding straw 2x per week; it is a long process
 - Potential solution: Thinking of purchasing a Tomahawk to help add bedding
- Challenge: Cows seem to experience some stress for the first few

days when they are re-attached to their tie-stall

- Potential solution: Considering transitioning to a free-stall barn

Sabrina noted the following challenges and solutions to housing calves in groups with an automated milk feeder:

- Challenge: Cross-sucking
 - Solution (helped): Calves always have free access to water, hay, and fresh grain, and house calves individually between 0-15 days of life
- Challenge: Increased risk of disease
 - Solution: House calves individually between 0 - 15 days of life and focus on keeping calves in a clean environment

Ana noted the following challenges and solutions regarding group-housed calves with an automated milk feeder:

- Challenge: Experienced a disease outbreak where all calves had to be separated
 - Solution: Quick communication with the veterinarian and using a more intense disinfectant during cleaning
 - Preventative solutions: New calf vaccination program, house calves in groups when they have proven healthy and thriving (between 7 and 10 days old) and keep calves in small groups (6 - 7) to reduce competition and the spread of disease. Also, continuing to focus on good calf management to maintain healthy calves (ex., Ensure a clean environment and good quality colostrum)

What recommendations would you give producers looking to make these changes to their barns?

Overall recommendations:

- Visit farms that have made similar modifications to the modifications you would like to make
- Discuss modifications with your veterinarian and other dairy cow

welfare advisors

- Take into consideration busy calving periods to ensure you will not run out of space in your calving area
- Do not forget to consider how calves will be safely removed from the calving area and easily moved to the calf housing area

Partager



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