

## COW COMFORT

By Julie Berry

A focus on cow comfort at each life stage results in high production.

# Cool Cows at North Harbor Dairy

Cows transitioned to a new barn and parlor at North Harbor Dairy, Sackets Harbor, NY with no loss in milk. Production was also maintained during the summer.

The farm owners credit their success to a focus on cow comfort from birth up.

“We’re most often asked, how do you make 100 pounds? All we know is it isn’t just one thing,” said Brian Robbins, who co-owns the 800-cow farm with his parents Ron and Nancy Robbins. “It’s all about details and people. I tell my employees the only thing that remains constant on this farm are the cows. If they don’t perform to our expected level, this is our fault, not the cows. We are the cause of variability all of the time. We constantly have to look at ourselves and our performance. Maintaining consistency is the biggest challenge.”

Calves are group-housed and robot-fed for two pounds of gain. The floor drains to septic. Calves are bedded on a straw base with sawdust added. No calves have died due to illness, and Robbins reports that their immune systems are “robust.”

A new construction double 16 parlor, that can expand to 24, replaced a double 12 in November. “The less time they’re in the parlor the more time they spend making milk,” Robbins said. “They have better let down and better milk out.”

Brian Robbins,  
North Harbor Dairy

The parlor and holding area have rubber mats. Both areas also have fans and sprinklers. “The challenge was everyone ventilates out of the parlor, but we couldn’t do that because of the prevailing wind, so we cross ventilate,” said Robbins. “Average production prior to the new parlor was 92 to 94 pounds in summer heat. Now it averages 100 pounds.”

Before the new parlor, somatic cell was 140,000, and while the farm family budgeted for the transition, cell count dropped to 90,000, and milk production increased five pounds.

Sprinklers are in all barns, including on dry cows. Fans were replaced with 52 inch fans on 48’ spacing, with three per row.

“It’s an important time in lactation. They need to be comfortable and cool. Research shows gains when fresh,” Robbins said. “We think about the cows and return on investment. If you put money into the cows, they’ll give it back.”

Stalls are sand bedded. Cows are bedded once a week and stalls are scraped three times a day. Stall improvements are being considered. Feed is pushed up every 1.5 hours. Lactating cows have brushes.

“We talk a lot about cow comfort,” Robbins said. “We make sure all stalls are functioning, that beds are in good order and fans are coming on.”

The farm is a host for public tours from the adjacent Old McDonald’s Farm, which is also owned by the Robbins family. “Tours keep us disciplined,” he said. “The public is constantly coming through here. We have got to be perfect.”

A new heifer barn was built in 2009 and a new dry cow barn is planned for this summer.

“They’re the most important cows, but they’re often overlooked. We want the best facility we can have,” Robbins said. “The calving and treatment area will be included to consolidate labor. Our goal is to increase from 800 to 1,200 cows without increasing labor.” Part of this strategy will include sort gates, daily milk weights and activity monitors.

Robbins is also experimenting with lighting. New lights were added that emit a minimum 20 foot candles for 18 hours and then less than 5 foot candles for 6 hours. □

