

Get to grips with cow comfort

Give your girls more grip, boost cow comfort and reap some additional benefits

Installing just a small area of rubber flooring could boost hoof health, cow fertility and feed intakes, so isn't it time you put the spring back in your herd's step? Read on and find out how and see if you think that your herd could benefit.

It's estimated that at any one time more than 20% of the UK herd is lame and the increased pressure on labour during the past few years, as the average herd size expands, is compounding the problem. But rubber flooring could help to relieve some of the pressure – on both cows' feet and staff.

Rubber flooring offers the grip of concrete grooving, but it's much kinder to claws. That's the view of leading lameness vet Nick Bell, from the University of Bristol.

"Although concrete grooving may make cows feel surer on their feet, there's a risk to hoof health from rough edges, so it might not be the best option," he says, adding that rubber matting offers a lot more than just a non-slip surface.

The results of a study carried out in Germany, for example, that looked at the replacement of concrete with rubber floors, reported a 10% increase in oestrus expression for cows housed on rubber matting. Compared to the concrete floor surface, rubber also led to an increase in step length, the number of steps taken per day and daily mileage walked by the 50 loose-housed dairy cows involved in the trial. The researchers also saw a lot more oestrus behaviour, such as mounting, on the rubber flooring.

"Cows have more confidence and feel free to express their natural behaviour when they feel sure footed and comfortable," explains Mr Bell.

Wall-to-wall

That said, it's important to limit where rubber flooring is used. "It's not ideal to have wall-to-wall carpeting throughout the cow house," he says. "One reason it

that it's useful to have some exposure to concrete so that there is some claw wear."

There is some conflict of opinion on claw wear, with some saying that horn growth will match the pattern of wear, some saying that rubber matting will increase horn growth and so more frequent trimming is required, and other vets and scientists saying that because there's less abrasion and bruising that there will be less horn growth.

"I fall into the camp that says that a little bit of concrete exposure – and therefore a little wear – is not a bad thing. My experience, supported by two studies, is that wear and growth balance out.

"But too much concrete, particularly if cows are standing on it for long periods, will increase sole bruising and this can then lead to problems with solar ulcers."

Strategic use

Hoof health and fertility benefits aside, strategic use of rubber flooring will also encourage cows to eat. Limiting it to the area where cows stand to feed and not installing it in cow house passageways is ideal. "It's a case of 'standing room only'. We want cows to eat and we want them to lie in their cubicles – not stand about in passageways or worse, lie down in them."

The most popular areas for installing rubber flooring are collecting yards, parlour entrances and exits and indeed parlours themselves, where both cows and producers can enjoy the benefits. Fitting the flooring at feed barriers – in a strip about 1.8 metres wide – tends to



Gripping stuff: rubber flooring gives traction

follow on from that, once producers have seen the benefits in the parlour, according to Mr Bell. And Batchelor Enterprises' Chas Butler agrees – his sales patterns certain bear this out. His company supplies and fits Kraiburg flooring – 24mm-thick rubber, made from industrial tyre shred, with a raised-rubber-stud surface for grip.

"Rubber flooring in parlours makes for quieter, more contented cows at milking and they flow in and out of the parlour much more easily too.

"More and more producers are installing rubber flooring – it's a growing trend. And it's being backed – if not driven in some instances – by vets and consultants, who are seeing, first hand, the positive impact that it's having on cow comfort, lameness and, most importantly, performance in herds throughout the UK."

This impact is almost instant, according to Mr Butler. "Producers will very quickly see a change in their herd – almost



Restaurant floor: improved comfort at the feed barrier should help to increase the amount of time cows spend eating

overnight. The pressure is off the cow – she can stand and be milked in comfort. "Most of the rubber flooring we've installed to date is in parlours. We see cows that want to come in and stand on the rubber floor to be milked – they're comfortable. They don't kick and fuss," he says, explaining that rubber flooring for a large 20:20 parlour would cost around £2,500, or as little as £1,500 for a smaller parlour.

"The parlour exit, often with a 90° turn to negotiate, is the worst area for a cow to walk. But the rubber flooring provides traction and the cow feels sure on her feet, so it improves cow flow out of the parlour."

Cow flow

Two or three metres of rubber flooring in the collecting yard and at the parlour exit will have the same effect – drawing the cows forward and improving cow flow.

"Within a week, I have producers telling

me that they're shaving 15 or 20 minutes off milking time. This is just one benefit that they can see immediately and there are plenty more besides, not least the extra time that's freed up to spend managing the herd, rather than staring at the back end of a cow," says Mr Butler.

He adds that once producers see what rubber flooring can do in the parlour, it gives them the confidence to invest in some more flooring at the feed barrier. "They've seen a return on their investment in the parlour and are curious – and excited – to find out more. Cows should typically spend up to five hours a day at the feed fence and encouraging them to stay there for longer and visit more often, by increasing cow comfort at the barrier, will have a positive impact on intakes.

"A lot of pressure is exerted on the cows' front feet when reaching through the barrier to eat and this increases wear on the outside wall of the hoof," explains

Mr Butler, adding that the additional pressure and bruising can result in solar ulcers. "Slipping can be a problem too, if the concrete surface is worn from heavy use. But the rubber flooring helps to relieve both problems."

Rubber flooring is available in the UK in sections or rolls from companies including Kit Speakman, Quattro and Batchelor Enterprises. "The suitability of the different types of rubber flooring available, like so many other things, will depend very much on the individual unit," says Nick Bell.

But one thing is certain on most, if not all, units, according to both him and Mr Butler, that there will be benefits in installing some rubber flooring – even if it's just in your parlour. These will be in terms of hoof health and cow flow, as well as relieving some of the day-to-day pressure on your cows' feet and labour.

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