

Cows will tell you what's wrong with their housing and facilities

# Just watch and learn

Time spent observing your herd's behaviour – at the feed fence and in the cow house – can be time well spent. Providing a tip-top cow environment can go a long way towards improving health, welfare, fertility and productivity. We spoke to two CowSignals experts to find out more.

text Rachael Porter





Bryn Davies

No one knows their own cows like a producer does and no one else wants the very best for them more than they do. But cow comfort is still less than optimal on many dairy units. But why? “I blame ‘our side’ – consultants, vets and building manufacturers. Basically the people advising producers,” says Advanced Nutrition’s Bryn Davies, who is also a CowSignals trainer.

“Producers are often given poor advice and sold buildings that are simply badly designed or inadequate.”

NWF’s CowSignals expert Rachel Lander adds that the problem is also that producers are ‘too close’ to a situation and something that’s not quite right becomes the norm. “CowSignals is a relatively new concept but the signs we look for have always been there, it is stuff that producers already know. It’s all about opening their eyes to it and getting a fresh perspective.”

### Six freedoms

CowSignals was developed to ensure that housed cows have the same six freedoms that they have at pasture. And two of the main ‘space’ restrictions in housing are at the feed fence and in the cubicles. Miss Lander says it’s vital to train people to go into cow housing with a check list. “It’s a case of simply taking the time to observe the herd – the things that you see day in and day out and may over look. This is a tool to help pick up problems.

“Look and see where the cows are. Are they evenly spread throughout the cow house or clustered in certain areas and avoiding others?” This could be linked to ventilation and air flow. “But the key is first to observe what’s happening and then to figure out why.”

Mr Davies says that before he goes into a cow house, he avoids disturbing the cows. “Before I look at anything else, I just want to observe them from a distance. I count how many are lying down and chewing the cud, how many



Rachel Lander

are just lying, how many are standing, and how many are at the feed fence.

“Ideally, I’m looking for between 60 and 80% lying down between four and five hours after milking. So a good time for producers to pop out and sneak a peek is around 11am or 11pm,” he says.

The next thing he observes is how the cows are breathing: “Is there a lot of panting? I believe that we have a lot of heat stress in UK herds – and not just during the summer months,” he says.

“Look at your cows and see if they’re trying to tell you that they need to have more air flow through the building.”

He says it’s typical to see cows taking between 70 and 80 breaths per minute, but the rate should be between 50 and 60. “Producers should consider the temperature at cow level – not the outside temperature. A cow can generate the same amount of heat as a 2kW heater. Little wonder, then, that one of the most ‘heat stressed’ places is the collecting yard, when the cows are all packed close together.”

### Greenhouse effect

He adds that skylights are also a problem in some cow houses. “Yes, they let plenty of light in, but they can also turn the cubicle shed into a greenhouse. I often see condensation dripping down onto beds. And wet beds and humidity increase the risk of mastitis.”

Ventilation is key here and smoke bombs are the best way to check if it’s adequate. Drop one in the middle of the cow house, as well as at the top and bottom ends of the building, see where the air goes, does it just hang around the cows?”

He adds that air outlets are just as important as inlets. “As warmer air rises and leaves the building through the outlets, the cooler air will be pulled in.”

A cow’s behaviour – and her appearance – can also tell you a lot about feed space in the building. “Look at the position of the cows when they’re eating. Are they pushing against the rail and is it being

polished clean or do the cows have calluses? It’s quite common to see feed rails that are too low.”

Mr Davies says that ideally there should be 600mm of feed space per cow. “And the feed trough should be clean and smooth. Cows have sensitive tongues and coating the feeding surface with epoxy resin will help to optimise intakes. “It’s not expensive to do – just £20 per square metre – and it can push up yields by at least one litre over night. So it’s money well spent. It’s relatively simple to do and the new surface should last for about 20 years.”

The width of the feed passage is also important. It should be about 3.5 metres – the length of the feeding cow plus the width of two cows. There should be enough space behind the feeding cow for two cows to pass.

“And there should absolutely – under no circumstances – be any dead ends. I hate them – they provide the perfect environment for bullying.”

### Rumen function

Dung is another great indicator when it comes to assessing ‘cow comfort’, according to Mr Davies. “Look at the quality of manure. Is it loose or thick? Does it contain grain or fibre?”

“It will give you an indication of rumen function and whether the cow is spending enough time lying down and chewing the cud.

“If I see too many cows standing for long periods of time then something will go awry with the diet. I like to see what I call ‘rosebud’ dung – I know the cows are healthy and comfortable.”

Miss Lander says that a day spent on a CowSignals course is a day – and money – well spent. “I’d recommend it to all those working with cows who want to manage a more productive and healthy herd.

“Even in the very best herds, there are usually things that can be picked up and improved. And it’s usually something that’s quick and simply to fix with minimal investment.”

She recalls one unit where every other cow had a lump on the right pin bone. “Just by observing – watching the cows go about their daily business – it was discovered that these abrasions were being caused by a bolt sticking out in the parlour. As the door closed, the cows were hit by the bolt.

“That was causing quite a significant welfare issue, but it was so easy to rectify once it had been picked up. It really was a case of watch and learn.” |