



Source: Emily Wilmes, Extension Educator-Livestock
University of Minnesota Extension
Stearns, Benton & Morrison Counties

Release Date: December 31, 2019

Contact: Emily Wilmes
(320) 255-6169 ext. 3; (800) 450-6171



Efficient, Productive Milking Parlors

By Emily Wilmes, University of Minnesota Extension

ST. CLOUD, Minn. — On dairy farms, we talk about a lot of things, like “efficiency” and “productivity” and “profitability” and that magical spot where all of those things come together. I think a really good example of this in the milking parlor. A parlor that runs efficiently will have a high throughput and will maximize labor usage. Building on that, efficient labor will also lead to a calm environment for cows, which in turn stimulates milk flow and even production. Add to that the milk quality benefits of a well-run parlor, and profitability ties in to the whole system. Is your parlor running at its most efficient? Is what’s being done in there helping your cows stay healthy and productive? Let’s review some ways to keep your parlor in tip-top shape.

Think about the environment of the parlor itself. Is your parlor a place cows want to go? Is it clean? Is it calm and inviting? Things to consider in your parlor include cleanliness, noise levels, and light. A clean parlor will help manage environmental pathogens and help keep cows and milkers healthy. A quiet, calm parlor will help stimulate milk letdown and reduce potential teat damage of milking machines pumping when little milk is coming out. Loud music or milkers yelling may cause adrenaline release in the cows, which prohibits milk letdown. Lighting in a parlor is often overlooked, but shouldn’t be underestimated. A well-lit parlor benefits the cows, as they like to clearly see where they are going and what’s going on. It also benefits employees, as they are able to see the udder well and ensure its cleanliness. Good lighting can also aid in the visual examination of milk when stripping the udder during prep.

Next, think about the management of the parlor. How are cows brought in? How are they prepped for milking? How long does it all take? The flow of your parlor matters, from the moment that pump turns on to the moment it turns off. Cows should be brought in efficiently, while still allowing them to move at a comfortable pace. Consider grouping cows by milking speed, or, at the very least, keep your slowest milkers until the end. While prepping cows, are all of the milkers (if there are multiple) doing the same thing? Is the prep pattern always the same? Is it a timely? A quick review of important milking preparation times:

- The teat skin surface requires 10-20 seconds of stimulation for optimum milk letdown
- Teat dip should be on the teats for 30 seconds to effectively kill bacteria on the teat surface
- Prep-lag time, or the time it takes from initial stimulation to attachment of the milking machine should be 60-120 seconds

Preparation of cows in a timely manner that allows for proper stimulation and contact time is crucial to a well-run parlor. It also has a direct impact on parlor throughput, which is especially important in herds that run the parlor nearly 24 hours a day.

The environment and management of your parlor play critical roles in ensuring it is efficient, productive, and in the end, profitable.

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