

## COW BEHAVIOUR

Take the time to stand back and look at what your cows are telling you. Their behaviour will highlight the pressure points in your system. Ignoring these signals will depress herd health and productivity.

### HOW TO ASSESS COW BEHAVIOUR

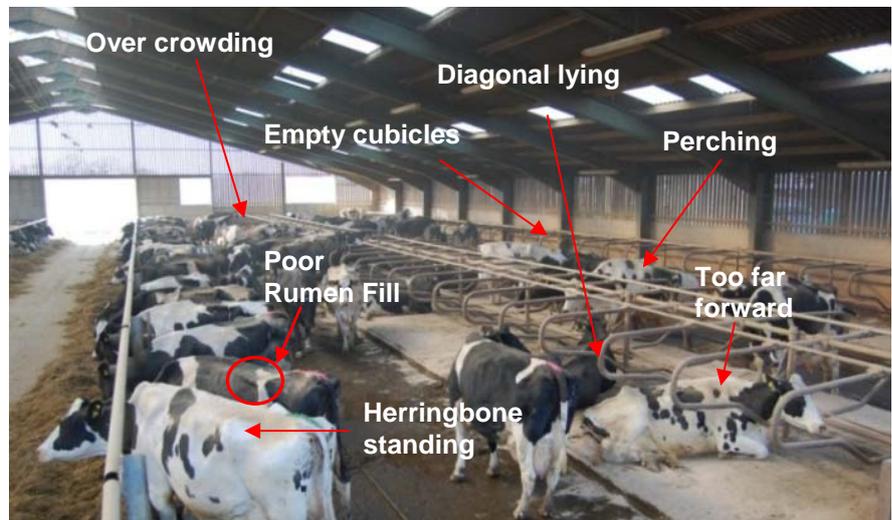
There are often a number of factors influencing cow behaviour so interpretation can be tricky e.g. is a cow swishing her tail because there are flies swarming around or is this a sign that she is suffering from Sub Acute Rumen Acidosis?

- Observe from large to small – first evaluate the entire herd (step 1), then groups within the herd, followed by individual animals (steps 2 and 3)
- Areas to look at include behaviour, cow condition, posture, cleanliness and alertness

### Step 1: HERD INDICATORS

Go into your shed when the cows are quiet and observe the whole herd – what is causing the behaviours you see? Look at:

- How the cows are using the cubicles
- How cows are standing at the feed face
- Space per cow – are there signs of overcrowding?
- Average rumen fill
- Lameness (use our Locomotion Scoring sheet to fully assess herd lameness)
- Bulling cows – are cows showing signs of heat? (see our Farming Note ‘Getting a Grip’)



Are you seeing a similar scene to the shed above? At a quick glance everything appears in order but on closer inspection there are some key issues that need addressing.

Use the table below to record the percentage of your herd expressing different behaviours 2 HOURS AFTER AN ACTIVITY such as feeding or milking. If signs are genuine

Total no. cows in group:  they will be repeated.

ACTIVITY	NO. OF COWS	% OF GROUP	TARGET %	POSSIBLE CAUSES
Feeding			10-15%	>15% - Inadequate feed space or poor ration palatability
Drinking			2-3%	>3% - Inadequate rim space or water fill rate
Loafing			5%	>5% Inadequate building ventilation, not enough cubicle spaces, incorrect cubicle dimensions, inadequate bedding
Lying			80+%	<80% - Not enough cubicle spaces, uncomfortable lying surfaces or poor feed availability Are there groups of cubicles that cows are not using? This may be caused by poor ventilation or incorrect cubicle dimensions
Standing in cubicles			4%	>4% - Uncomfortable lying surfaces, incorrect cubicle dimensions (See our series of Farming Notes on ‘Cubicle Modifications’)
Perching (2 feet in 2 feet out of cubicles)			<5%	>5% - Wrong positioning of neck rail
Standing diagonally in cubicles			0%	>0% - Cubicles set at the wrong width, wrong positioning of neck rail
Lying diagonally in cubicles			0%	>0% - Poor lunging space, incorrect brisket board, cubicles set at the wrong width

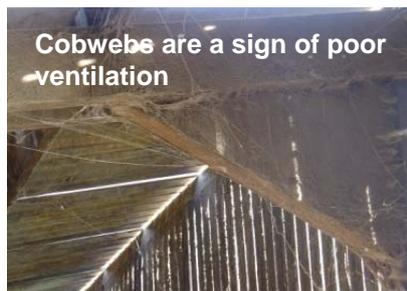
Targets are guides only. % of cows in each activity will vary depending on time of day

## Step 2: INDIVIDUAL COW BEHAVIOUR

### BREATHING RATES

Are cows breathing at an elevated rate? A healthy cow should take a deep breath 10 to 30 times per minute. If cows are breathing faster assess:

- **Ventilation** - Is enough air freely flowing in, up and out of the building? Are there cobwebs on the roof? (See our Farming Note on 'Ventilation')
- **Signs of illness or acidosis** - Fast breathing can be a sign of pain or fever



### FEEDING STANCE

Are cows standing in a herringbone style and stretching for food? This puts pressure on the front feet causing horn overgrowth, sole ulcers and reduced intakes. Assess:

- **Feed surface height** - Cows should feed off a surface that is 6 inches higher than the standing surface. See our Farming Note 'Barrier Design'
- **Stocking rates** - Ideally you should aim for a minimum of 0.75m/cow of feed space, (see our Farming Note on 'Building Dimensions')

### TAIL TWITCHING

Are cows tail twitching despite there being no flies? If so assess:

- **Feed intakes** - Irregular feed intakes can be a sign of acidosis
- **Milk Quality and yield** - Low milk fat percents are a common symptom of acidosis with severe cases resulting in reduced yields

### RUMINATING RATE

Are cows chewing between 30-60 times before re swallowing? If not, assess:



- The long fibre content of the diet – if chop length is too short then cows will not ruminate for long enough, reducing saliva production leading to SARA

## Step 3: PHYSICAL INDICATORS

### Injuries on hocks and thighs

Hock damage can range from roughness of the hair to more severe callouses.



- Are cows lying still or shifting around in the cubicles? This is a sign that the bedding surface is uncomfortable, damp, or abrasive
- Damp bedding caused by poor ventilation

causes bed sore type injuries on hocks and thighs

- Excess use of hydrated lime can cause hock damage.

### Injuries on the ribs, backs and hocks

- Do cows rub themselves as they rise and fall in the cubicles? Look for rubbed areas of metal

- Are there any sharp edges or objects in the shed?

### Rubbed necks and Briskets

- Are cows rubbing against the neck rail or wall at the feed trough



### MUCK ON THE LEGS

More than 2 inches of muck above the coronary band indicates a problem-

### Scraper alley width

- High stocking rates combined with narrow passages will result in high levels of slurry in the passageways. See our Farming Note on 'Building Design and Layout' for a guide to measurements

### Scraper efficiency

- Post scraping, there should be less than a cow pat worth of muck in an area 1m<sup>2</sup>

Carefully observing cow signals can help you make improvements to cow health and productivity. Ring Kingshay to discuss a **HowMyHerd** assessment for your farm.

Issued February 2009



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