

Waterbeds for Cows Provide Comfort Across New York State

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“Waterbeds for cows? You must be kidding,” is what Ed Switzer of Switzer Equipment Company frequently hears when introducing his cow waterbed line to dairy producers in New York State. However, Ed believes in the dual chamber waterbeds that provide cow comfort to thousands of cows across New York State and says comfortable cows equal more productive cows.

Originated in Europe, the dual chamber Waterbeds from Advanced Comfort Technology started in popularity in Wisconsin during 1999. The demand has grown throughout the United States. One of Ed Switzer’s goals of the cow waterbeds is he ‘wants the waterbeds to look like the day [they were] installed.”

According to Switzer, ninety percent of the Waterbeds installed in New York State are in a freestall setting. However, the waterbeds are designed for both freestall and tiestall facilities.

Cow waterbed benefit cows by providing superior cow comfort, requires less bedding, providing cleaner cows, a dry place to lie, creating lower somatic cell counts, and reduces incidences of mastitis.

Cow waterbeds do not promote the growth of bacteria and they provide dairy producers with a long lasting product.

During 2003 the dual chamber cow waterbed was introduced which provides a cushion for the cows knees. The dual chamber allows cows to lie down on more cushion than other cow beds. The water is actually breaking the cow’s fall as she lies down. As the cow lies down onto the waterbed, her weight redistributes the water to the cow’s pressure points, allowing these pressure points to float on water. The water forces the cow’s knees and hocks up, which helps prevent sore knees and swollen hocks. The crown or the middle of the waterbed is higher than the sides, which acts as a channel to pull any moisture off the back and sides of the waterbed.

Less bedding is required with the cow waterbeds as excessive bedding can retain moisture. Even with less bedding, waterbed cows stay clean, the bedding stays dry, which in return saves the producers money and time. Any type of bedding can be used in conjunction with the waterbed system. Switzer stated most of his customers use sawdust.

The waterbeds always retain their original shape, when the cow leaves the stall. The waterbeds remain higher in the middle and never pack versus other cow beds where dips may form. These dips and pockets allow water to collect and remain under the cow.

Freezing is not an issue with the cow waterbed systems. The combination of the insulation value of the rubber and the heat transfer from the ground underneath the beds, along with the cow's body heat, prevents the waterbeds from freezing even in the coldest conditions.

Dairy producers find that they, as well as their cows, adapt well to the waterbed system in both freestall and tiestall installations. Producers observe their cows lying down more and the stalls are full after installing the cow waterbed systems. And many producers find it's more difficult get their cows up for milking when using the waterbeds because of the comfort.

Hemdale Farms of Seneca Castle, NY

With 600 installed waterbeds, Hemdale Farms of Seneca Castle, NY is a firm believer in the cow waterbed systems. Cow comfort is very important at Hemdale. Hemdale averages 85-86 pounds of milk per cow with a herd average of 29,000 pounds. In 2000 Hemdale installed 298 waterbeds in their older existing freestall and continued with one row at a time and in their new addition.

Switzer stated, "It's not uncommon to see each row of cows lying down at Hemdale."

According to Luke Huysman, herdsman at Hemdale, cows are bedded with kiln dry sawdust and limed on a four day schedule. "We don't use as much bedding," he said. Huysman also stated the waterbeds were "Very easy to clean off; they look like the day they went in." He continued "[we] haven't had any breaks."

Most of the waterbeds have been installed at Hemdale for five years and there are no signs of wear, Huysman explained,

The rough surface, similar to a very fine tire tread, prevents water from collecting. He then went to demonstrate how the bed moves with the contour of the animal. It's very common to see the cows laying down and relaxing, he continued.

The stalls at Hemdale are 46 and 48 inches wide to accommodate the large sized herd. There have been no injuries, and swollen hocks are not an issue on this farm. "We are not going to build another barn with out them," stated Luke Huysman.

Huysman went on to say in his previous job he spent a lot of time replacing canvas covers, which is not an issue with the cow waterbeds. Huysman incorporated fifteen cows of his own into the Hemdale herd. These cows were previously on sand bedding had no problem transiting to the waterbeds.

Hathorn Farms, Stanley NY

The Hathorn Farms in Stanley, NY milk 484 cows three times a day and they also raise 408 young- stock according to Todd Hathorn. The- Hathorns currently have 143 cow waterbeds installed in their freestall barn.

“We are very happy with the waterbeds,” stated Hathorn. He went on to say, “We’re pleased with them. I think the longevity will definitely be there.”

The Hathorn Farm has had the waterbeds for two years.

“You see absolutely no wear; on other fabric [mats] I’ll see some wear,” stated Hathorn. “Can’t ever say a cow went in with a swollen hock and came out with one. “Its either down or gone.” When speaking about his waterbeds verses the other mats which keep the swollen hock up.

Todd explained it takes a first calf heifer some adjusting to the idea that all four of her feet are moving when stepping onto the waterbed but they get used to it. Sawdust is the bedding of bedding of choice at this farm. Todd explained it is actually a challenge not to overbed the waterbeds.

Todd stated the waterbeds are “Far ahead of the rest.” And he doesn’t have any reasons not to recommend them.

Cow waterbeds are installed in 80 bed rolls. The rubber is unrolled, cut and secured over the concrete platform. The waterbed material is approximately three quarters of an inch thick prior to filling and is available in many widths. An aluminum strip fastens the rubber in place under each stall as well as four anchors keep the beds in place.

Once the beds are in place, they are filled with water using a fill tube and a water meter. The waterbeds beds require 14 gallons of water.

There isn’t any other product comparable to the cow waterbeds according to Switzer. “Farmers make their own testimonials,” regarding this product. Switzer stated “You want to see cows lying down.”