

Dry and Lactating Cattle Housing



New Requirements

Dairy Farmers of Canada (DFC) has finalized new requirements for dry and lactating cattle housing in the proAction® Animal Care module to align with recent updates to the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle (March 2023). As part of the process, DFC and provincial farmer organizations tested the requirements on a sample of farms across Canada. Farmers and other participants shared valuable feedback that shaped the final requirements.



Scan to visit the code on the NFACC website



The new requirements will be part of on-farm validations starting in April 2027, along with the full package of updates related to the Code of Practice.

What are the Requirements?

The new dry and lactating housing requirements cover 4 topics:

Stocking Density

In free-stall barns, stocking density must not routinely exceed 1.1 cows per usable stall, with a further shift to 1 cow per stall effective April 1, 2031. Temporary increases up to 1.2 cows per stall may occur.

In bedded pack pens, cows must be provided with 9.3 m² (100 ft²) of usable resting space per cow; this same space allowance applies to hospital pens. Smaller breeds, such as Jerseys, require at least 80% of the standard space allowance (7.4 m² / 80 ft²). The scrape alley is not included in the square footage calculation.



Stanchions

Stanchions are not permitted as they prevent cows from adopting normal resting postures, including a head back position. Stanchions are permitted for temporary interventions.

Newly Built Barns

Newly built barns (construction started on or after April 1, 2024) must provide lactating and/or dry cows with daily untethered freedom of movement for a minimum of one hour per day that allows them social interaction with other cattle, if it is safe to do so. Examples include access to loose-housing areas, exercise yards, or pasture.

New barns intending to house calving animals must allow cows to turn completely around, and cows must not be tethered at calving. As of April 1, 2029, all farms must ensure cows calve in loose-housed maternity areas.

A newly built barn is defined as new, separate building or a rebuild (e.g. tear down and rebuild of barn, not a renovation within a current structure) of any pre-existing dry or lactating housing facility where construction began on or after April 1, 2024. A newly built barn does not include a renovation within or expansion to pre-existing housing.



Freedom of Movement

For existing tie-stall barns where construction began before April 1, 2024, cows must be provided opportunity for unrestricted movement for a minimum of 55 days per production cycle (calving to calving); the days do not need to be consecutive, and exercise periods per day must be a minimum of 1 hour. Weather conditions may temporarily limit outdoor movement; however, farms are still expected to meet the minimum over the production cycle.

Freedom of movement can be provided through loose housing (e.g. free-stall housing), pasture, or regular access to exercise yards.



Why is proAction requiring this?

All dry and lactating cow housing must be designed and maintained to keep cows comfortable, healthy, and able to rest without unnecessary competition. The overall goal is to ensure barns promote lying time, reduce crowding at resting areas, feed, and water, and ultimately support improved production, health, and welfare.

Current scientific evidence demonstrates the health and welfare benefits of these new cow housing requirements.

- Strong evidence shows that providing cows adequate space and regular opportunities for free movement improves overall comfort, mobility, and welfare.
- Housing that encourages rest and reduces competition has shown benefits to cow comfort and productivity.
- Freedom of movement encourages expression of natural behaviours.
- These requirements align with current animal welfare science and the updated Code of Practice.

What Does This Look Like On-Farm?

Farmers should:

Assess: Does current housing meet the required stocking density, space allowance, and movement expectations?

Remove: Stanchions used for housing must be removed entirely, as they do not meet current welfare requirements and limit cows' ability to rest naturally.

Review: In new barns, calving facilities should be reviewed to ensure cows can turn completely around and calve without being tethered. Reminder: by 2029, all cows must calve in loose-housed maternity areas.

Monitor: Free-stall barns should monitor stall counts and herd size to ensure they remain at or below the allowable ratio and prepare for the shift to a permanent 1:1 cow-to-stall ratio in 2031.

Measure: Confirm that cows housed in bedded packs have the required square footage of usable resting space, with the scrape alley excluded from calculations.

In tie-stall barns constructed before April 1, 2024, farmers must provide at least 55 days of opportunity for movement per production cycle. Farms should consider seasonal conditions when planning how to achieve the minimum exercise requirements. For example, early spring or winter weather may pose challenges which should be considered to ensure minimums are met. For newly built barns, farmers must design spaces that allow cows to move untethered and interact socially every day. This may include designated exercise yards, integrated loose-housing sections, or outdoor access areas designed for safe, year-round use.



For additional information on these requirements, contact your Provincial Coordinator.