

To maintain health and increase milk production, experts say cows need to sleep comfortably for 12 to 14 hours a day. The more comfortable a cow is while sleeping, the more milk that she can produce.

That’s why Western Kentucky University’s farm recently installed new cow mattresses. WKU’s farm is the first in the country to install the Dutch Mountain Cow Mattresses.



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Donated by Cowhouse International, the new beds are similar to memory foam mattresses, said Adam Blessinger, dairy herd technician for WKU’s farm.

Blessinger is responsible for maintenance and care of the animals and their facilities, including health checks, feeding, breeding, vaccinating, calving, milking and forage production.

“We believe that these mattresses will be much more comfortable for the cows to lie on and that they will help enhance our hoof health,” Blessinger said. “Our old beds are approximately 15 years old and are starting to show some age.”

The old mattresses were waterbeds that were made of rubber and contained a pocket of water where the cows could rest. While the waterbeds were comfortable for the cows, they put pressure points on the cows' joints when lying down or getting up from the bed, Blessinger said.

The new beds, however, are waterproof mattresses with elastic foam that conforms to the cows while they are lying down, Blessinger said. Different from the old beds, the new beds have a polypropylene cover that provides the cows with enough traction to safely lie down and stand up, Blessinger said.

The Dutch Mountain Cow Mattresses will allow the cows to lie down faster and for longer, which increases milk production, decreases the cows' stress and improves hoof and leg health, Blessinger said.

Lying down is vital to increasing a cow's milk production, Blessinger said.

"Cows sleep lying down just like other animals," Blessinger said. "The point of the beds is to keep the animals as comfortable as possible. When the cow isn't eating or being milked, we want her to lie in the bed."

For 12 to 14 hours a day, cows should be lying in their beds, Blessinger said.

The cows are able to come and go from the beds as they please, except during milking, Blessinger said.

Since the new beds were installed March 9, Blessinger has noticed the cows are using the new mattresses more than the old ones, he said.

“Visually, it seems to me that the cows are using the mattresses more and are less likely to stand up as I walk through the barn,” Blessinger said. “Once the cows have settled in, it will be interesting to see if there are any differences in lying times. The cows spent approximately 12 hours per day lying down in the waterbeds.”

Aside from the benefits of the new mattresses, there are some disadvantages that come with the adjustment as well.

“The mattresses would be easier to install in a new barn,” Blessinger said. “The mattress has raised the bed height by 14 (centimeters) so we are in the process of adjusting our stall heights to once again fit the cows.”

Blessinger also said the top cover of the beds may need to be adjusted soon as he has seen some stretching since installation.

WKU’s farm currently has 50 cows, and 45 of them are in the milking herd, Blessinger said.

“There are 56 beds,” Blessinger said. “I would like to keep between 45 and 50 cows in the milking herd so they are not overcrowded.”