

How Was Her Day?

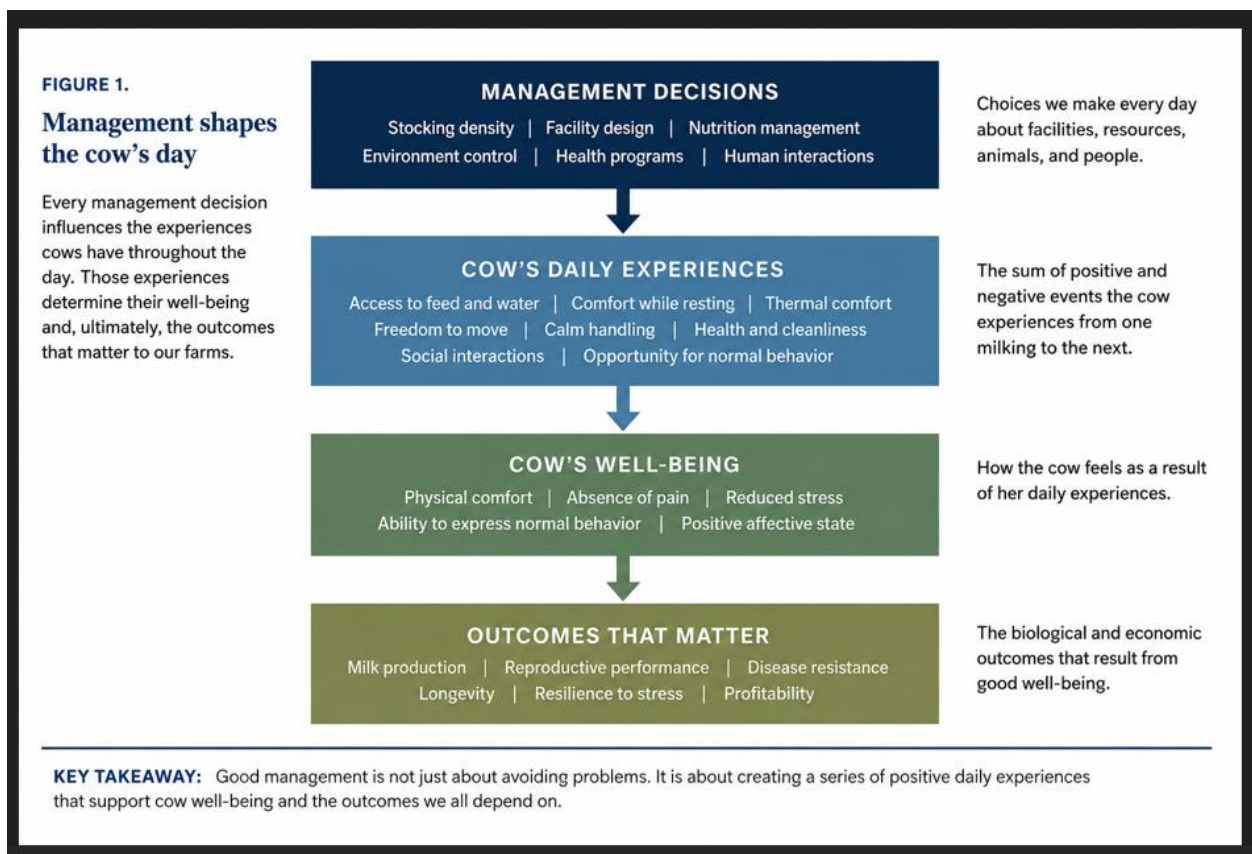
Looking at Dairy Management Through the Cow's Eyes

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Every evening, dairy producers ask the same question: *How much milk did the cows produce today?* It is an essential measure of herd performance, but perhaps an equally important question often goes unasked: *How was their day?*

Milk yield, reproduction, and health are the outcomes we measure, but they are also the biological consequences of everything a cow experiences between one milking and the next. Every interaction with her environment: finding fresh feed, competing for bunk space, walking to the parlor, resting in a stall, coping with summer heat, or being handled by people, contributes to her overall well-being. While any single event may seem minor, together they determine how successfully she eats, ruminates, rests, resists disease, and ultimately produces milk.

Modern dairy management has become remarkably sophisticated, yet the most valuable perspective may still be the simplest: looking at the day through the cow's eyes.



For many years, animal welfare focused primarily on preventing hunger, thirst, pain, disease, and discomfort. Those principles remain fundamental, but our understanding of animal well-being has evolved considerably. Today, researchers recognize that good management is not simply the

absence of negative experiences. It also involves creating conditions in which animals can experience comfort, security, and express normal behaviors.

This distinction is important. ***Welfare describes the conditions we provide. Well-being describes how the cow experiences those conditions.*** Two farms may meet the same basic welfare standards, yet cows on one farm may spend the day competing for feed, standing because stalls are uncomfortable, or struggling to dissipate body heat. From the cow's perspective, these daily experiences matter.

Every management decision influences that experience. Comfortable stalls encourage resting. Adequate bunk space reduces competition. Reliable ventilation minimizes heat stress. Consistent milking schedules reduce unnecessary standing and waiting. Well-trained employees move cattle calmly, reducing fear and allowing cows to maintain normal behavior. Together, these seemingly routine management practices determine whether the cow experiences a comfortable, predictable day or one filled with repeated challenges.

A Cow Lives Her Day One Experience at a Time

Imagine a typical day through the eyes of a dairy cow. She leaves her stall expecting fresh feed and unrestricted access to water. She walks to the feed bunk only to find that dominant cows occupy much of the available space because stocking density is excessive. After waiting, she finally begins eating. Later that afternoon, temperatures rise and several fans stop working after a power interruption. Panting increases, feed intake declines, and rumination slows. Milking is delayed because of an equipment malfunction, extending the time she spends standing on concrete and away from feed and water. By the time she returns to the pen, feed has already been pushed away from the bunk.



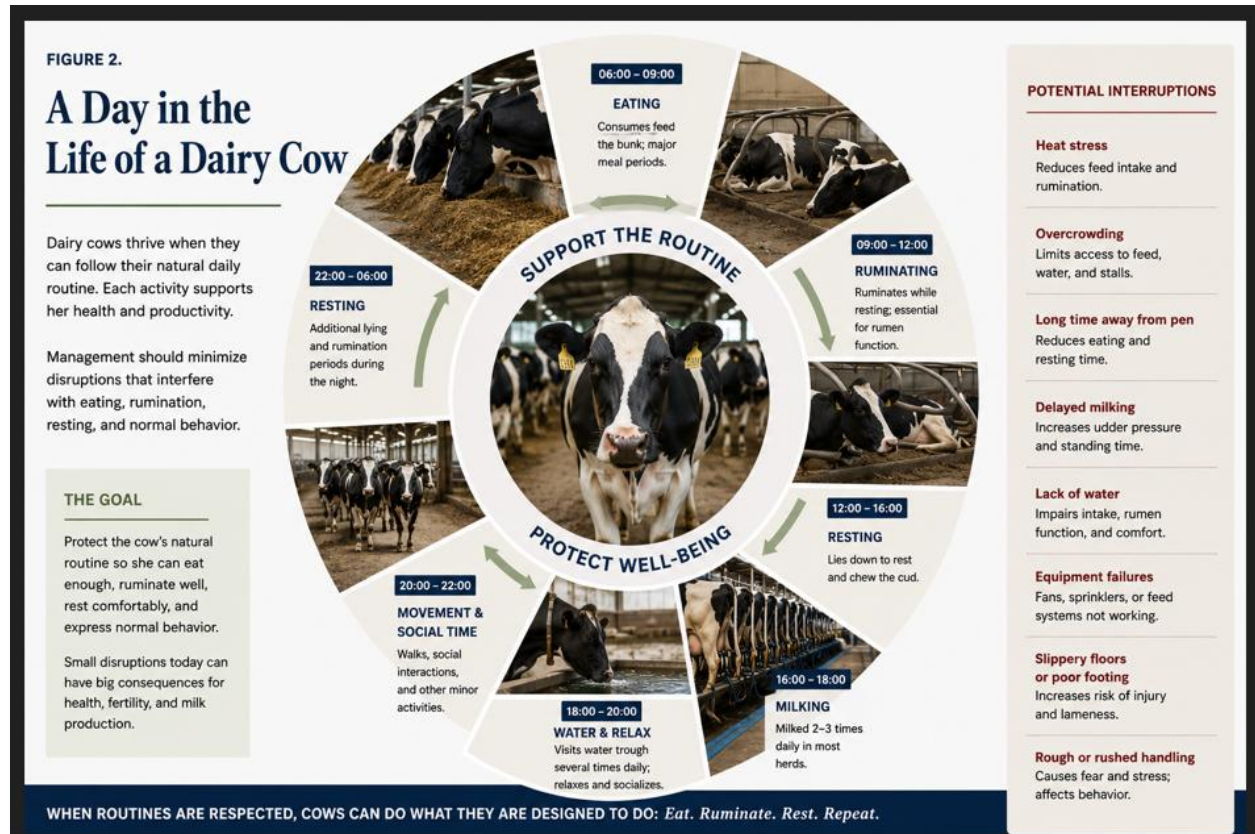
None of these events alone may appear serious. The fans are eventually repaired. Milking resumes. Feed is pushed back within the hour. From a management perspective, the problems were temporary. From the cow's perspective, however, they were part of her day.

Cows do not experience management as a list of independent events. They experience it as a continuous sequence of opportunities and challenges. Every disruption to eating, resting, cooling, drinking, or social behavior requires physiological adaptation, and adaptation always carries a biological cost. The objective of good management is therefore not merely to solve problems when they occur, but to prevent unnecessary disruptions before they affect the cow.

Small Management Problems Become Biological Problems

Every challenge activates mechanisms designed to maintain homeostasis. Heat stress reduces feed intake before milk production declines. Prolonged standing increases pressure on the claws and contributes to lameness. Delayed access to feed alters rumen fermentation and reduces rumination. Extended time away from the pen limits opportunities to eat, drink, and rest. Individually, these responses appear small. Collectively, they influence health, productivity, and resilience.

One of the most overlooked concepts in dairy management is the cow's daily time budget. Healthy dairy cows devote remarkably consistent amounts of time to eating, ruminating, resting, walking, drinking, and interacting with other cows. These activities are not easily interchangeable. Time lost from one behavior cannot simply be recovered later.



Milk not produced because of heat stress, interrupted milk let-down, or delayed milking is rarely regained the following day. Likewise, resting time lost because cows spend excessive hours waiting to be milked or standing in overcrowded pens is seldom fully compensated later. The biological consequences extend beyond the immediate event, influencing digestion, hoof health, immune function, and ultimately milk production.

This is why seemingly minor management failures deserve attention. A malfunctioning fan, an empty water trough, delayed feed delivery, slippery flooring, or prolonged handling may last only a short time, but each event interrupts the cow's normal routine. The most successful dairies recognize these disruptions early and correct them before they become biological problems.

The End-of-Day Well-Being Audit

Ask yourself...	What it tells you
Were cows eating calmly with adequate bunk space?	Feed access and social competition
Was clean water continuously available?	Hydration and cow comfort
Were most cows lying comfortably?	Stall design and resting opportunity
Were cows free of panting or other signs of heat stress?	Cooling system performance
Did cows spend excessive time away from feed and water?	Milking and handling efficiency
Was rumination activity consistent with normal behavior?	Digestive function and comfort
Were cows walking normally without signs of discomfort?	Hoof health and lameness
Did any equipment failures disrupt normal routines?	Preventable management challenges
If I were this cow, would today have been a good day?	Overall assessment of well-being

Technology has transformed dairy farming. Activity monitors, rumination sensors, automated milking systems, and computer vision can identify subtle changes in behavior long before they become obvious to the human eye. These technologies are valuable, but they should complement, not replace good stockmanship.

One of the simplest management tools is also one of the most effective: a brief walk through the barn at the end of the day. Instead of asking only whether production goals were achieved, ask whether the cows experienced the kind of day that supports health and performance.

This requires only the discipline to evaluate the day from the cow's perspective rather than our own. Farms that consistently ask these questions are often the same farms that achieve excellent production, because they understand that healthy, productive cows are first and foremost cows that experience comfortable, predictable, and low-stress days.

Milk production, reproductive performance, and longevity are not isolated outcomes. They are the cumulative result of thousands of small management decisions made every day. At the end of every workday, perhaps the most valuable management question is no longer "How much milk did the cows produce?" but rather, "How was their day?"

References

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