

# An assessment tool to help producers improve cow comfort on their farms

## COLLABORATORS



## Warning

This cow comfort assessment tool is based on actual scientific knowledge. Its utilization remains under the responsibility of the reader. Some information might have evolved since the elaboration and the publication of this tool and users are encouraged to verify the exactitude of the information prior to its application.

It is not the objective of the present tool to propose a single and unique management approach. This advisory tool is flexible and can be adapted to different situations. It reflects a consensus between the scientific researchers who elaborated this project, the dairy experts and the dairy producers consulted.

The scoring system elaborated to evaluate the rearing strategies does not aim at ranking producers. Its purpose is to help producers to be aware of the importance of cow comfort, to evaluate risky strategies and to trigger exchanges between the producers and experts working with them.

This series of documents is the result of a research project carried out conjointly by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC), Université Laval, University of Guelph, University of Calgary, University of British Columbia, and Valacta Inc.

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## Presentation of the Assessment Tool

This assessment tool was developed as part of an on-farm assessment project which took place in 2010-2012. The aim of the project was to develop an on-farm animal comfort assessment tool that helps producers assess how well they are meeting their Code of Practice (DFC, 2009; <http://www.dairyfarmers.ca/what-we-do/animal-health-and-welfare/code-of-practice-for-the-care-and-handling-of-dairy-cattle>) and to identify management and environment modifications to could potentially improve dairy cow comfort on their farms. The different components of this tool have been tested in 240 commercial dairy herds, comprising of 100 tie-stall, 110 free-stall farms with milking parlor and 30 with Automatic Milking Systems, located in Quebec, Ontario and Alberta. Fifteen researchers and extension specialists of several fields related to dairy cow comfort (behaviour, nutrition, health, and management) participated in the design of our tool. Producers and experts involved in this project actively participated to the improvement of this tool. Overall, they judged that it was an effective and useful tool to assess cow comfort and to help dairy producers to take decisions for improvements in their herds. It is an excellent tool which could be used by various experts (advisors, veterinarians, others) as part of their intervention with dairy producers. The cow comfort assessment tool described in this document served as background material for the Canadian dairy farmers' Animal Care Assessment Program launched in July 2013 (<http://www.nfacc.ca/dairy-on-farm-pilot-summary>).

The assessment tool is built around critical areas of dairy cow comfort identified for tie-stall and free-stall farms based on areas of dairy cow comfort covered by the Code of Practice for the care and handling of dairy cattle (DFC, 2009), and is organized as follows:

1. A '**Management Questionnaire**' which establishes an initial contact with the producer and evaluates his cow management.
2. An '**In-Barn Checklist**' (one for 2A-Tie-stall, one for 2B-Free-stall) and its associated protocols (2C-Cow height and hook bone width, 2D-Stall wetness, 2E-Calving pen cleanliness, 2F-Feedbunk alley floor cleanliness, and 2G-Slipperiness of flooring) to allow for measurements in the barn in order to evaluate the cow housing environment.
3. '**Animal Outcome Measurements Protocols**' (3A, and their data recording sheet 3B) to allow for the assessment of dairy cows for specific animal-based measurements.
4. A '**Scoring Compilation**' (one for 4A-Tie-stall, one for 4B-Free-stall) intended for assessors to compile data collected in the 'Management Questionnaire', 'In-Barn Checklist' and 'Animal Outcome Measurements Protocols' and to assign scores.
5. A '**Scoring Synthesis**' (one for 5A-Tie-stall, one for 5B-Free-stall) intended for the producer to discuss the results, highlighting the strengths of the producer's cow management as well as aspects which need improvement.
6. A '**Score Explanation**' document (one for 6A-Tie-stall, one for 6B-Free-stall) ensures to the user of the tool, a proper understanding of the choices made by the research team when attributing specific scores to each of the key elements of the tool. More details can be found in Code of Practice for the care and handling of dairy cattle (DFC, 2009).

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