

Winter Housing

I had been asked to write about winter diseases but sadly there are far too many diseases associated with winter to cover them all. I would hazard to say that many of them aren't directly linked with winter, but more associated with what we do with our animals in the winter. Obviously there are many farms and situations where cattle can't be out all winter as they would probably disappear into the mud; however if we choose to house them we should really be improving their lot overall.

Pneumonia is not completely avoidable and there are times when well grown youngstock, still on their mothers, will succumb – especially with those well known risk factors of big temperature swings and damp, still weather. Vaccination programs can help a lot, but generally I feel that money spent on altering housing setups is best spent first.

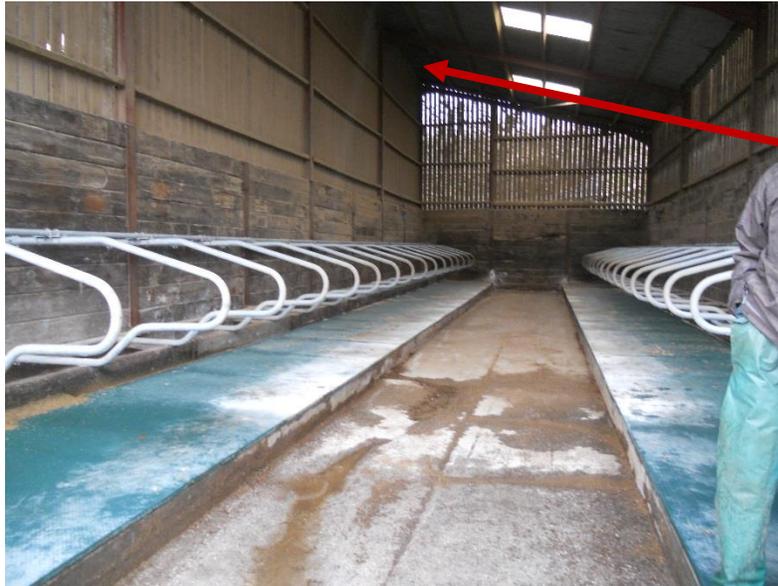


In most situations it is the outflow of air that limits air movement in a shed; generally where people have tried to modify sheds to improve ventilation, they open up the sides to varying degrees because this is much easier than increasing the opening at the pitch. Also there is a concern about the amount of rain which will come in through the top; this does have to be considered if the ridge is over a bedded area, but in so many sheds there is actually some sort of passageway in the centre anyway.



This ridge is right over a bedded area. Currently it is completely closed.

The amount of rain which falls in through an open ridge is very little, except in very heavy downpours. Mostly we think of ventilation as providing fresher air, but it should also remove moisture with it which makes a much bigger difference to the dampness of bedding than is usually appreciated.



Very little space for outflow of air, only between space boarding.

Leaking gutters and dodgy downpipes must not be underestimated; a considerable amount of liquid will be added to the bedding this way, just think about what percentage of roof water goes to each downpipe, often 25% – considerably more than the amount which will come in through an open ridge (especially if it has upstands). This keeps the air damper at all times allowing bacteria to multiply and spread much more easily.

Damp conditions are so much better for bacteria and viruses to survive and breed in – not just pneumonia bugs but mastitis and digital dermatitis bugs too. Adult stock produce a huge amount of moisture every day – around 50 litres from their backs and 10 litres through breathing – and this needs to be removed, not allowed to condense out and add to the wetness of the shed conditions.

So fresh, moving air is what is needed but NOT drafts! For young animals it is the air speed near ground level which needs reducing, particularly if they have to lie on soggy bedding. Ideally for young animals the fresh air needs to come in above them and then be taken upwards on a warm updraught without dumping down and chilling them. However this is difficult to achieve without thought as calves won't produce enough heat to achieve enough warm updraught to get the air out of the ridge of a shed.

So don't just ask your vet for more pneumonia antibiotics this winter, ask them to look at your sheds some time as effect modifications aren't necessarily that expensive. Avoiding pneumonia will always result in better growths than any treatments, no matter how effective.

For more information on Westpoint, please contact our Launceston practice on 01566 86985, or visit www.westpointfarmvets.co.uk.

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