

Feed Stalls Affect the Social and Feeding Behaviour of Lactating Dairy Cows

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Increasing the amount of available feed bunk space for lactating dairy cows has been shown to reduce competition and improve access to feed. Despite this, we still see high levels of aggressive behaviour at the feed bunk with increased amounts of bunk space. Research in other domesticated species has indicated that the configuration of feeding spaces can have profound effects on competitive behaviour observed at the feed bunk.

The objective of this research was to determine if the addition of partitions (feed stalls – see photo) between adjacent cows reduces aggressive behaviour while feeding. Twenty-four lactating Holstein cows were subjected to each of 2 treatments. The treatments, each tested for 10 d, were: 1) 0.92 m of feed bunk space/cow, and 2) feed stalls (0.87 m of feed bunk space/cow with feed stall partitions separating adjacent cows).

Total daily feeding time increased while the time spent standing in the feeding area (when not feeding) and the frequency of aggressive interactions at the feed bunk decreased when feed stalls were added to the feed bunk. The feed stalls also forced cows to change the strategy by which they displaced others from the feed bunk. Cows were forced to initiate contact at the rear of the animal that they were displacing rather than from the front and side. Further, those cows ranked lower in the social hierarchy at the feed bunk had the greatest decreases in the number of times they were displaced per day when fed using the feed stalls.

Implications: Based on these results, we recommend the provision of feed stalls to improve comfort at the feed bunk, particularly for subordinate cows. This could help reduce the between-cow variation in the composition of ration consumed by preventing these cows from being forced to access the bunk only after dominant cows have sorted the feed.

