

# PARLOR EFFICIENCY

## MANY FACTORS IMPACT BENCHMARKS AND GOALS

### How do you measure parlor efficiency?



Does having fewer milkers means my parlor is more labor efficient? Am I paying too much to my milkers, making my parlor labor efficiency poor?

These are some of the questions I usually get from clients looking to improve parlor performance and efficiency.

### FYI

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Last year, I surveyed six dairies where I did parlor audits and milker training schools, and evaluated parlor efficiency (*see Table 1*). All six had fairly modern parallel or herringbone parlors; they varied in cow numbers from 380 to 3,000. Most of the dairies were located in the Northeast (Pennsylvania, New York and Vermont), with one in New Mexico.

From this survey and personal experience, I believe there are three factors most affecting parlor efficiency. Of the three, only one has to do with labor. These main factors are:

- **Cow numbers.** The more cows that need to be milked, the more diluted parlor operating costs will be.
- **Average milk production per cow.** As shown in the survey, the higher the individual milk production, the more we can reduce labor cost per cwt.

- **Milking speed.** This is the one labor-related factor. By constantly working and training milkers, we can have a positive impact on parlor efficiency.

Let's pay particular attention to this last point. The bottom line is how fast can we get cows milked, and the best way to keep track of this parameter is by monitoring

- **cows/hour or turns/hour**
- **number of cows milked/milker per hour**

As shown in the table, dairies with the highest number of cows milked per milker per hour were the most labor efficient. We can see from this data that the most efficient dairy is the one from New Mexico, with only 22¢/cwt. labor cost, followed by one of the New York dairies, with a 47¢/cwt. labor cost.

For any of these parameters, it's important to set up your own benchmarks and goals according to the type and size of your parlor. Geographical area, weather conditions and other factors will have an impact.

However, don't focus only on milking speed. Milking quality, attention to the cows while milking, and adequate udder prepping and milking routine are crucial to the success of your milking program as well.

**What should be monitored** when it comes to parlor efficiency? The two parameters I suggest monitoring monthly are:

**1. Labor cost per cwt.** It's hard to compare large Western dairies to dairies in the Northeast because of cow numbers. However, it is important to define your own goals based on where your dairy stands today. Some dairies in

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the Northeast have been able to obtain numbers under 50¢/cwt. of labor cost throughout 2010. It's not about salary, but most importantly how many cows can each milker milk in 1 hour. A reasonable target in some dairies with a full milking routine could be between 70-75 cows per milker per hour. In dairies with minimal prepping procedures, targeting around 140-150 cows per milker per hour wouldn't be unreasonable.

**2. Pounds of milk per stall per hour.** This is an excellent parameter to evaluate parlor efficiency. Once again, base your benchmarks and goals according to your herd size, type of parlor and individual milk production per cow.

Finally, push your milkers to keep a fast pace while in the parlor. However, always remember that it's important to have a good balance between speed and work quality.

This balance may differ according to location of the dairy. Due to climate, a dairy in New Mexico may have less environmental-related health problems than a dairy in Pennsylvania or Florida. The type of facilities, stalls and bedding are important when it comes to defining the right milking routine and milking pace expected by your milkers. Also, expected employee turnover rate can be important when defining those goals.

Consider all these factors when establishing your own milking program and setting parlor efficiency goals. Always discuss them with your veterinarian and external consultant. □

**TABLE 1. PARLOR EFFICIENCY SURVEY**

	Dairy 1 New Mexico	Dairy 2 Pennsylvania	Dairy 3 Pennsylvania	Dairy 4 Vermont	Dairy 5 New York	Dairy 6 New York
Milking cows	3,000	1,350	650	380	2,100	900
Milk/cow/day (lbs.)	80	86.4	68.4	68	78.6	70
Stalls	60	40	40	28	80	28
Labor cost/cwt.	22¢	65¢	76¢	70¢	60¢	47¢
Cows/milker/hour	143	56	46	51	67	75
Lbs. milk/stall/hour	190.5	121.5	52.9	61.5	98.2	125

Source: APN Consulting, LLC ([www.apndairy.com](http://www.apndairy.com))