Taking the necessary steps to keep your cows comfortable can improve milk production, benefit your bottom line and show consumers how much you care about your cows. A new research project discovered benchmarking current cow management and housing practices to national standards could help producers improve their herd’s comfort and health.

University of Guelph professors, Derek Haley and David Kelton, and doctoral candidate, Clemence Nash, are measuring cow comfort on dairy farms as part of a national cow comfort and longevity project.

“Generally speaking, the better you provide for your cows the better they will perform,” says Nash. “Through this project we are trying to determine how factors related to cow comfort are associated with cow longevity, health and performance.”

Researchers assessed several Ontario, Alberta and Quebec dairy farms over a one-year period. They visited 40 tie stall, 40 freestall and 10 robotic milking farms. The researchers investigated various factors contributing to cow comfort, such as lying time, injuries, stall design and bedding type. Producers were given a report summarizing how well their farm met target measures developed by dairy industry consultants and researchers, and laid out in the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle.

Researchers discovered more than half the producers had made changes to improve cow comfort within the year following the initial farm visit, based on the feedback they received.

The results show the Ontario dairy industry is proactive about cow comfort, and producers want to improve the level of care and handling they provide their cows, says Nash.

The producers also received a second report outlining how they compared with each other on certain cow comfort factors. This provided additional feedback and further encouraged producers to improve cow comfort on their farm, says Nash.

The study provides an estimate of current housing and management practices and insight into cow comfort across Ontario dairy farms, says Nash. Although it may not be representative of the entire industry, it is an average and a starting point, she adds. She can now measure associations between cow comfort and cow health, productivity and welfare.

“This project allows us to gain the producer-perspective,” she says. “We are trying to create a flow of information and include producers in the research as much as possible.”

This summer, Nash plans to follow up this project by sending an online survey to dairy industry stakeholders across Canada, including producers. The survey will give those not involved in the national project a chance to share their views and opinions on cow health and welfare, and productivity issues in the Canadian dairy industry. More information about the survey will appear in a future article in The Milk Producer.