

# Optimal solutions, not architects' dreams

Financial hard times, the ups and downs of markets, or changes in family circumstances: organic farmers must continuously realign their operations. In livestock management, this frequently involves construction-related changes. The FiBL stall construction extension service offers holistic solutions.

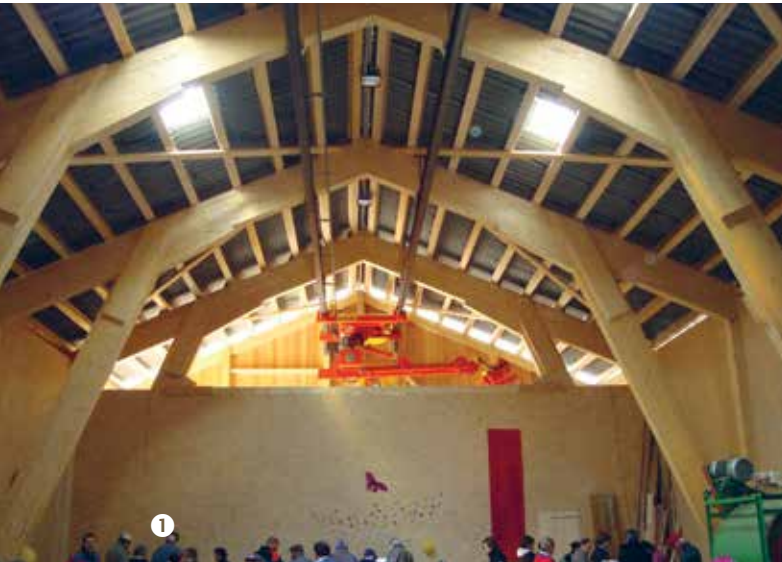
The clientele of FiBL agent Eric Meili consists not only of farms in difficult circumstances, but many innovative farmers as well. He has planned and carried out some 250 animal housing renovations and new constructions over the past twenty years. For the past year Stefan Schürmann has been assisting him in this work. In addition, FiBL agent Claudia Schneider offers solutions to farms planning to house cows with horns in their free stalls.

“The starting point of every consultation is the strategic orientation of the farm. The first thing we do is analyse the adjusted tax returns of the past three years,” Meili explains. “On this basis we then formulate business goals and integrate them in the construction plans.” The type of production, subsidies and investiture are used as a basis for setting

the cost ceiling. Modular construction has proven effective. Designing stalls, hayricks, feed storage areas, etc. as separate modules is the best way to fulfill the requirements specific to each farm.

## “We sell ideas”

Rather than charging a fixed percentage of the construction volume as is customary in the stall design sector, FiBL agents charge an hourly rate. This is one of the key differences between us and other construction planners, Meili emphasizes. “This gives us the freedom to develop solutions that truly fit the needs of the farm rather than fulfilling architects' dreams and building everything as big as possible.” Meili and Schürmann are renovation specialists and hence



they sell ideas and not stall equipment. Their approach, however, is not always met with understanding or appreciation. For instance, due to family circumstances a farmer recently wanted to switch from a dairy to a cow-calf operation. Meili and Schürmann proposed remodelling the existing barn and adding an exercise yard. This would have only required an investment of 100,000 francs rather than 250,000 francs for a new building. But the client insisted on a new building, like the ones that he saw at agricultural trade shows and that some of his fellow farmers had.

For Meili and Schürmann, however, economical construction is an absolute must. There are too many farming operations living off and consuming their own capital. Part-time farming, with 10-50% or even more than 50% of the total income earned off-farm, is also an option considered in the search for the optimal solution. “Wanting to maintain full-time farms at all costs limits the range of viable solutions too much,” Schürmann insists.

### **Cut costs, but never at the expense of animal well-being**

In cost-effective construction, it is essential not to sacrifice the welfare of the animals. FiBL thus provides solutions for free stalls that are tailored to the needs of cows with horns. “The higher costs are an investment in animal well-being and

animal health,” says Claudia Schneider. She is the expert when it comes to converting to free stalls and making structural adaptations to them.

In herds of cows with horns, it quickly becomes evident when the cows are not content: they injure each other in conflicts. Each stall corner and each piece of stall equipment therefore needs to be checked to make sure that it does not interfere with the species-typical behaviour of the cows or provoke conflict. In such cases the best solution is often something other than the most obvious stall design. “The conditions in the stall must be appropriate for the animals living in it and the persons working in it, and must also be adapted to the operation,” says Claudia Schneider. *ta*

**Contact:** [eric.meili@fibl.org](mailto:eric.meili@fibl.org), [stefan.schuermann@fibl.org](mailto:stefan.schuermann@fibl.org), [claudia.schneider@fibl.org](mailto:claudia.schneider@fibl.org)

- ❶ Rebuilding after a fire: Housing for 22 horned cows with calves. Left: column-free hayrick with glue-laminated beams, hay crane. Right: Free stall with boxes. ❷ New construction for 36 horned cows with calves: Divided stall, feeding place with feeding barn, boxes for cows, deep litter for calves, feeding place in-between, liquid manure pit underneath. ❸ Stall for 80 dairy cows, Meili minimal stall, silage prohibition. Covered cubicles, feeding barn with hayrick, group igloos in the foreground. ❹ Remodeling: Free stall for cows with horns.

