

Use of indicators of dairy cow welfare in the EU

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Dairy farming is widespread in the EU with milk the number one single product sector; in value 15% of agricultural output. EU animal welfare legislation provides general requirements for dairy cows and Member State implement this by checking the resources provided to dairy cows and whether these are sufficient to prevent animal suffering. Although not defined in legislation animal based indicators are now frequently used in farm assessments. At national level there is little data on how farms perform based on indicators and there is no overview of dairy cow welfare. Somatic cell count is the only indicator widely used as it is a mandatory requirement. Its use has brought about huge improvements in milk quality in the last decades and dairy cow welfare has also benefited from low levels of mastitis. Other milk parameters used by farmers to improve cow welfare include those for acidosis and ketosis, but have not been used as part of wider schemes. Lameness and body condition score are used during farm assessments but systems have not been set up to monitor farms on the basis of these indicators. Although several Member States have set intervention levels for official investigation, e.g. 20% lameness, they do not have an overview of lameness in dairy cows. Breeders' associations use ease of calving to improve cow survivability, reduce injury at calving and improve reproductive performance. Several Member States have promoted certain cow types for certain farm conditions. Data is not available on the uptake of either of either of these initiatives by farmers. Animal indicators are effective for identifying problems on farm; however they have not been utilised to establish benchmarks for farms. By using existing data more systematically, farmers can be clear on the standards they achieve and Government and industry can provide assurances that animal welfare is respected. In order to achieve this, indicators need to be further standardised, with data defined for collection and analysis and intervention levels established.