

Benchmarking in a Swedish welfare assessment system for dairy cattle

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'Ask the Cow' is an advisory animal welfare service performed by trained assessors. The service includes objective assessments of animal-based welfare measures. In a benchmarking system, the results from the assessments are compared with a reference group of randomly selected Swedish dairy herds. An action plan, in combination with the benchmarking system, guides the owner towards measures to improve animal welfare. The aim of the study was to estimate body condition, cleanliness and prevalence of lesions, lameness, long or asymmetric claws and abnormal rising behaviour. Ask the Cow assessments were performed on 1,750 cows, 1,676 heifers and 1,623 calves at fifty randomly selected Swedish farms. The prevalences of remarks were estimated at individual and herd level per animal category. Herd level estimates will be used to update the benchmarking system. The highest prevalence was found for lesions in cows followed by cows standing in cubicles, cows with asymmetric claws, lameness in cows, dirty cows and dirty heifers. In comparison to the current limits in the benchmarking system, statistically significant differences were found. Prevalence of dirty and lean animals and animals with lesions have decreased in all age groups. Dirty cows have decreased from 24 to 10%, heifers from 28.8 to 9.7% and calves from 15.5 to 4.7%. Lean cows have decreased from 6.2 to 1.6%, heifers from 4.1 to 0.7% and calves from 7.1 to 3.8%. Lesions in cows have almost halved, from 30.5 to 17.3% and decreased in heifers from 3 to 1.6% and calves from 4.1 to 0.9%. Animals with high body condition scores have become more common, from 3.1 to 6.3% in cows and from 2 to 7.6% in heifers. In cows, lameness have increased from 8.9 to 12.9%. The development towards larger herds and loose-housed systems probably have an impact on the changes.