

Improving animal welfare by assessing college's farms *Gidi Smolders*

Health and welfare is a major topic in the Netherlands in both organic and non-organic dairy farming. This report highlights issues arising from welfare assessments conducted on Dutch farms producing milk for Ben and Jerry's (B&J) ice cream. The Netherlands is the base for the European market for B&J ice-cream. Four years ago 11 farms were asked to produce milk for B&J. High human and animal welfare was a pre-condition. In order to evaluate the animal welfare on those farms, cows were assessed at the end of the housing season and at the end of the grazing season. At a plenary meeting the farmers discussed the results and the possible improvements on their farms. Since the farmers had a desire to control things on their own farms, they wanted to assess their own farms and animals. In a number of sessions a checklist was developed by the group of farmers and tested. This so-called 'caring dairy' checklist is now used in all kinds of farmers groups, conventional and organic, with farmers assess each others cows and farms. A 5 hour workshop at a host farm at the beginning of the process includes a theoretical and practical part and at least a proposal from the host farmer with three points to improve. The following assessments of colleagues take 3 hours per farm, which also results in proposals to improve.

Starting workshop

The starting workshop with 8 – 12 farmers takes place at a host farm volunteering. The host farmer provides room for the workshop participants, a lunch and coffee or tea and data and records of his farm over the last year. The workshop is addressed by a specialist in assessing animal and farm based welfare and health. The workshop serves different goals: getting to know each other, learning to assess cows and farms, realizing the large differences between farms and providing theoretical knowledge of animal welfare. The day starts with a theoretical part where the host farmer presents his records and the other farmers are asked to comment. The theoretical discussion of animal welfare also takes place at this time, using examples from the participating farmers. This part lasts 1.5 – 2 hours during which time questions are also asked as to why farmers should aim for animal welfare and which factors are important (housing, feeding, care). Differences between farms become apparent. In this theoretical session it is also explained that improved welfare not only benefits the animal directly, but also results in improved animal health, decreases the need for treatment, is good for the image of organic dairy farming and last but not least, it is also better for human welfare too.

Needs of animals

In the theoretical part of the starting workshop it is explained that the 5 freedoms are the leading items in animal welfare. It is also explained that the demands of society might contradict with the demands of animals. In dairy farming the circumstances on most farms are not too bad (even if there is a large variety) and the image of the dairy sector in the Netherlands is quite good. The more direct the association between welfare and production, the greater chances are of meeting animal welfare requirements. Hunger and thirst are not desirable in lactating and growing animals because of their negative impact on production, but is sometimes practiced in dry cow management. Pain and suffering reduces production but is sometimes seen as normal during a curing process.

Fear and sorrow and natural behavior are sometimes issues even in organic farming. Dehorning is normal, space in stables is limited (also because of measure for nitrogen emission out of stables), nearly all stables have dead ends, etc. However, the Dutch minister of agriculture in January 2008 wrote: "Stables and farm management will in 15 years time be build around the animal, in a way society likes it and supports it. Animals will behave naturally, and will not be hurt in their integrity (get daylight, no castration and no dehorning)".

Aid in balancing animals and management

The performance and behavior of animals in a particular system are good indicators of whether they are able to cope with the circumstances on a farm. In other words, cows show if they fit with the farm or whether there is an imbalance between animal needs of the cow and the possibilities of the management. In the workshops it always became a point for heavy discussions whether farmers in their management were able to keep up with their cows. If cows are genetically able to produce 12000 kg of milk and the farmer only offers a management enough for 7000 kg of milk, then problems are likely to occur. The solution may be to improve management and/or keep animals with a lower genetic potential. If management can only provide enough feed, care, attention, housing etc. for 7000 kg of milk, the farmer should breed a cow adapted to that management. Traits other than milk yield can be in focus when breeding, such as longevity, mastitis index, or strong legs. The importance of finding a balance between the needs of the animals and the management is pointed out during the discussion, as well as the need to focus on animal welfare and

how this can also reduce disease and veterinary treatments, which in turn can result in improving farmers' welfare and economic situation. The physical farm data of the farm is used during the workshop to compare actual achievement with the goals of the farm.

In order to avoid the bias introduced by organizational blindness and mirroring customs and habits, the animals and farm are assessed by colleagues, who also propose improvements after the scoring. In the practical part of the workshop farmers learn to score what they see, assessing without judgment, how the assessments works. They base all the recording on the checklist, which they use on their own and assess cows on body condition score (BCS), locomotion score and skin damage score. The host farmer only explains, but does not interfere with the assessment.

At the end of the workshop the farmers propose points to improve at the host farm. After this, the host farmer plays an active roll again by commenting on the suggestions: whether he agrees with the improvement points or not, whether they can be implemented and over what period of time. After a one day workshop, farmers form small groups of 3-4 persons for assessing each others farms.

Assessment by colleagues

The host farmer organizes the assessment on his farm: he invites his colleagues, provides them with his farm figures about production, disease incidences, health status, replacement and fertility (preferably by email a few days before the assessment) and serves coffee/tea.

The meeting starts with a 'kitchen table part' which takes about half an hour in which the host farmer explains the results of the farm and her/his goals to the invited 2-3 colleagues. In the checklist, questions about production, somatic cell counts, diseases (milk fever, mastitis, lameness, acetoaemia), still born calves and other dead animals in the last year, fertility parameters, longevity and live yield of the herd. It saves time if the figures can be looked at before the visit.

For the stable part (with clean clothing and boots) the checklist is worked through individually by each of the invited participating farmer. It covers design as well as animal based parameters, such as locomotion scores, laying down and standing up behavior, space, bedding floor quality, obstructions in passageways and dead ends in the housing system, light, fresh air, quantity and quality of feed and drinking water, farm yard and hygiene. Ten cows are assessed for locomotion score, body condition and skin damages. A critical view is needed because all blemishes, including those that are very small one, are recorded This is a very good demonstration to the farmers that if more cows have hairless patches at the same place of the body, it points to something in the housing system which is not well designed or used well enough. Special attention is paid to the dry cows, which sometimes tend to be a neglected group, even though they should receive more cared than the lactating cows. Dry cows account for 10% of total assessment score. At the end of the housing period, the risk of finding problems related to the housing system is greatest, and fortunately, it is not a busy time for farmers, so most assessments take place in this period.

Based on the kitchen table part and the stable part, a 3 point plan to improve animal health and welfare is discussed between the assessment team (the visiting farmers) and the host farmer. Obviously, some improvements are easier implemented than others. Some may need a complete renovation of the housing system while others only need a small investment or awareness every day. Examples of improvements suggested by the farmers in relation to these sessions are to make the cubicles longer, to roughen the walking floor, to change the breeding bulls, improve ventilation, break down some walls, add minerals and trace elements to the ration, or even to build a new barn.

Strict organization of the discussion and mutual trust

An assessment session takes 2.5 – 3 hours per farm if well organized and focusing on the task. The discussion should be related to the host farm records, assessment results, management routines and the visiting farmers' suggestions for improvements. This demands a fairly strict steering of the discussion.

This type of assessments alternates between farms, so that all farmers will have their turn as host as well as assessor. Trust forms the basis for this process of assessment. Sharing farm data with colleagues will only be possible if there is confidence that figures are confidential, which means that they are only used by the group to improve animal welfare. Assessing farms this way is a quick pathway to evaluate the management and animals of farms. Farmers learn from colleagues and a positive side effect of the process is that farmers

see things at each others farms and through the discussions with colleagues that they can easily implement at their own farms to improve things.