Strategies for keeping dairy cows and calves together on European farms
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Introduction
Survey study
• Goal: describe the type of housing and management used on European farms with cow-calf contact (CCC) systems
• Farm selection based on each country’s individual circumstances
• Prerequisite: calves kept with lactating cow at least 7 days
• 104 farms with CCC identified in six countries
• Farmer/manager interviewed on site or over the telephone

Methods

Results – farm description

Results – household income from milk
Results – rearing systems

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• Colostrum intake achieved by suckling on 92% of farms
  • 74% of all farms milked suckled cows
    – 60% of farms using foster cows either did not milked suckled cows, or only milked the dams
  • Of the farms that milked suckled cows, 82% milked twice per day
  • Median number of calves 1 – 3 per foster cow depending on country
  • Forage from average 1.0 – 2.9 wks depending on country
  • Concentrate from average 0.7 – 4.5 wks depending on country
    – 31% of farms did not feed concentrate

• 85% of farms practiced abrupt separation
• Negative responses after separation
  – Vocalisation among cows: 72% of farms
  – Vocalisation among calves: 94% of farms
  – Impaired milk let-down: 16% of farms
  – Decreased calf weight: 5% of farms
• Strategies to mitigate separation distress
  – Reducing the number of cows the calves can suckle
  – Reducing daily contact time
  – Letting younger calves suckle the cows first
  – Starting to milk suckled cows some time before separation

Conclusions
• Non-random farm selection
• CCC is practiced under very variable conditions on European farms
• Large differences in herd size, housing systems, milking systems, and calf rearing practice between and within countries
• What is optimal weaning practice?
• Potential challenges with indoor housing

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Thank you!

Photo: Emma Tegler