

NEWS RELEASE



09 July 2009

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EU: COWS ARE MILKED BEYOND ENDURANCE

New reports on dairy farming by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) conclude that cows in the European Union are bred to produce unreasonable amounts of milk and suffer from hunger, lameness and infertility.

Compassion in World Farming calls on consumers to choose organic or RSPCA Freedom Food milk.

EFSA's five reports on dairy farming show that cows are suffering throughout Europe as a result of breeding for high milk yields. Dairy cows are bred to produce more milk than it is healthy for them to produce and are increasingly kept solely indoors (zero-grazing), causing serious welfare problems.

High-yielding cow breeds such as the Holstein are designed to turn feed almost exclusively into milk which makes them hungry and emaciated as a result. The EFSA reports state that the risk of this negative energy balance is particularly severe in high-producing genetic strains. This leads to infertility and infertile cows have to be sent prematurely for slaughter.

Phil Brooke, Welfare Development Manager at Compassion in World Farming said: "This is an essential set of reports. For far too long we have been milking cows beyond endurance. We need to breed a robust cow which can produce sustainable amounts of milk on pasture without mining her own body - a cow with a work-life balance."

Compassion in World Farming calls on governments and retailers to insist that cows should be bred for health and welfare rather than excessive yields and encourages all consumers to choose organic or RSPCA Freedom Food milk only.

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For further information or to arrange interviews contact Valentina Moressa on 01483 521952 or 07771 926005 (out of office hours) or email valentina@ciwf.org

Notes to the editor

About the reports

- The reports are available at <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/>
- **Quotes from the reports**
- “In order to improve dairy cow welfare there is an urgent need to promote changes in the criteria used for genetic selection in the dairy industry. These changes should result in animals in which there are fewer demands on their mechanism of adaptability, less lameness, less mastitis, less reproductive disorder and less metabolic disorder”.
- “Higher weight should be given to fitness and welfare traits when these may conflict with selection for milk yield. Genetic selection for improved fertility, health and longevity is likely to improve welfare and lead to greater profit for the farmer.”
- “When comparing the different farming systems it is concluded that the farming system has a major influence on leg and locomotion problems (...) Magnitudes of the adverse effects and risk estimates in housing are much greater in systems involving cubicle housing or tie-stalls, than in straw yards or at pasture.”
- “Most lame cows are in pain and have greater difficulty in coping with their living conditions than non-lame cows because of the effects of the foot or leg disorder on walking, lying comfort, standing up and avoidance behaviour. Lame cows are more likely to become subordinate, lose body condition and are more prone to show reduced fertility and to develop mastitis and metabolic disease. “

About the welfare of dairy cows

- There are over 240 million cows used to produce milk in the world, including over 24 million in the EU27.
- Selective breeding of dairy cattle has led to a dramatic increase (50 per cent) in milk yield over the past 40 years.
- Breeding and managing cows for high yield often damages their health and has led to a decrease in their average productive lifetime. Modern dairy cows are often worked to the limit of their physical capacity, or beyond.
- In the UK a cow has on average only three lactations before she is culled due to health or infertility problems, a much shorter lifetime than a suckler cow producing just enough milk for her own calf.
- Infertility is becoming an increasing problem in high-yielding cows and is known to be linked to stress and loss of body condition because the cow is unable to keep up with the metabolic demands of milk production by enough intake of nutrition.
- A cow may also be carrying several kilograms of milk in her udder, making walking difficult. The uneven pressure on the hind feet caused by the large udder can lead to lameness. Studies have shown high proportions of cows are underweight and suffer from lameness and mastitis (a painful inflammation of the udder).

Housing

- Traditionally dairy cows would obtain most of their food during the summer grass-growing season from grazing on pasture and be kept inside only during the winter, when they would be fed mainly on conserved forage (hay or silage). Increasingly, dairy cows are being kept indoors for longer, or even all year round in ‘zero-grazing’ systems.
- Zero-grazing is common in North America but is also increasing in the UK, especially for large and high-yielding herds.

- Cows kept indoors have reduced opportunity for natural behaviour and exercise and have a greater risk of health problems. Their health may be affected by poor ventilation in the shed, leading to an increase in humidity and risks of infection. Hard concrete flooring is more likely to damage their feet than soft surfaces or pasture and is painful for lame cows to walk or stand on. Increasing the time cows spend housed therefore impacts on foot problems and zero-grazing systems have been found to increase lameness.
- Housing cows for longer can also increase the prevalence of mastitis.

Alternatives to high-yield breeds

- In any dairy breed, including Holsteins, selecting for robust traits (good legs, resistance to mastitis, ability to maintain body condition on pasture), low levels of inbreeding and traits for beefiness in calves.
- Encouraging Holstein farmers to cross their dairy cows with bulls of more robust breeds, eg Friesian, Montbeliard, Shorthorn, Swedish Red etc.
- Encouraging the development of more robust breeds, eg Friesian, Shorthorn, Ayrshire, Montbeliard, Brown Swiss etc, but also breeding these for the above characteristics.
- Encourage the development of genuinely dual purpose breeds such as Montbeliard and Shorthorn which can produce good beef calves as well as reasonable amounts of milk.

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