

Meeting of the sub-group on calves and dairy cows

12th meeting, 12.06.2023, 9:30 to 12:30
(videoconference)

– MINUTES –

Independent expert	Francesca Fusi
Civil society organisations	EDA Eurogroup Slow food
Business and professional organisations	Farm & Animal Health Copa Cogeca
Member States	Sweden The Netherlands Ireland Denmark
European Commission	DG SANTE – Colleagues from Unit G3
Guest	Christoph Winckler (EURCAW RE, EFSA expert)

1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed the participants to the 12th meeting of the subgroup.

2. Presentation: « EFSA recommendations vs. Subgroup discussions »

The Chair summarised the EFSA recommendations in the opinions on welfare of calves and dairy cows published on 29 March and 16 May 2023 respectively.

3. Discussion

The subgroup discussed the EFSA recommendations in the two opinions.

1. Calves

- a. No individual housing, grouping calves in small groups, space allowance.

Grouping calves was considered difficult, particularly in small farms. Pairs seemed the easy way to start, as it would only require removing the wall between two pens.

Denmark reported that with the Danish label, calves must be in pairs within the 1st week (day 7), but calves face a lot of pneumonia and diarrhoea issues. However, other members of the group did not see diseases as an issue for small groups, because calves are already in contact even if individually housed.

No individual housing will require a deep change in mentalities to change housing strategy (need different configuration in buildings) and management practices (to avoid spread of diseases, for instance).

For Ireland the main challenge would be the space allowance and access to pasture, as calves are in general reared in large groups, with automatic feeding and high stock density and would need to move to smaller groups.

Regarding space allowance, most of the subgroup agreed that 3m²/calf is feasible and realistic, even if it seems easier to implement for dairy as already done in many countries, and less for veal farms, where there is a tendency to strictly apply the current EU legislation. The big difference in systems across the EU must also be taken into account.

- b. Feeding management

Regarding the provision of milk of 20% in body weight/day, most of members agreed on the recommendation, even if other highlighted that quality is equally important than quantity in this case. It was requested that the recommendation is translated in the legislation in provisions that can be monitored. To include in the legislation a quantity/volume range rather than a % of body weight was suggested.

The subgroup welcomed having more clarity on the number of meals per day, which would allow taking steps to stop 'once/day' practices. Most of the subgroup members supported including '3 meals/day' in the legislation.

- c. Cow calf contact (ccc)

While for veal having a foster cow was considered feasible, having calf cow contact for dairy production is a big change. Keeping the calf with the dam in a dedicated pen or in the calving pen were both considered acceptable, even if questions were raised on the risk of transmission of diseases. It was clarified that literature is not conclusive on health problems caused by cow calf contact systems and there is a gap of knowledge. Salmonella problems seem more linked to hygiene issues than ccc systems themselves.

The subgroup shared some reflections on how ccc could be implemented in tie stall systems, and the possibility to have some mandatory untethered periods around calving, with a calving area available.

2. Dairy cows

a. Space allowance

Following questions by the members of the group, it was clarified that the 9m²/cow recommended in the opinion means a permanent indoor area for cubicle systems. This space allowance was based on recommendations given in a series of European countries. It is not considered a minimum requirement, but a recommendation to guarantee animal welfare. Having enough indoor space is important, and it is not compensated with outdoor access. The need to have both a minimum space allowance coupled with the requirement of a cubicle per cow was highlighted. For other systems than cubicle systems, the required space allowance would be different (e.g., for loose housing systems space allowance would be higher requiring more space in the lying area). The possibility of having some areas (e.g., feeding areas) outside was evoked. The necessity to have incentives for farmers and exceptions for small farms (<50 cows) was also stressed.

b. Access to pasture

Having a definition of pasture was considered important as pasture is not defined in the EFSA opinion.

The subgroup underlined that requiring access to pasture in the legislation could imply significant costs and be difficult for some farmers (e.g., if pasture not available). However, it was pointed out that requirements in the legislation could also help for receiving funding. It was considered very important to well assess the impacts and have appropriate transition periods.

c. Health

The subgroup reflected on the possibility to require animal welfare plans in the legislation, keeping in mind that there are already health plans provisions in the animal health legislation. The subgroup recommended to avoid overregulating (e.g., include the obligation to monitor lameness, mastitis, etc. but avoid specifying score systems, etc.).

The importance of making the animal welfare visits and plans as much efficient as possible was emphasised. New technologies helping to monitor animal welfare were also suggested (e.g., PLF (Precision livestock farming) systems, drones, etc.).

d. Enrichment

Members of the subgroup shared experience on the use of brushed. Some possible adverse effects (e.g., transmission of ectoparasites, tail lesions) were described, and well managing them was recommended.

4. Closing

The Chair thanked the participants for the very constructive work done during the twelve meetings of the subgroup.