4. Meeting of the sub-group on calves and dairy cows

Fourth meeting, 16 June 2022 (Videoconference)

- MINUTES -

Attendance

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 G5, E4
Guest Inge	Santman-Berends (NL)

1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed the participants to the 4th meeting and introduced the colleague Ester Alaez Pons.

2. Presentation of legal requirements for calf health management

General health management requirements for calves

Annex I of Directive 2008/118 lays down minimum standards for the protection of calves regarding frequency of inspections and colostrum management. Directive 98/58 gives more general provisions on record keeping of medicinal treatment and mortalities. These requirements are undefined and need to be more precise.

3. Farm & Animal Health, Netherlands and Eurogroup present on 'Health management for calves'

The main welfare issues for calves are related to the separation from the dam, isolated housing until 8 weeks, colostrum management, housing management and lack of comfort or overpopulation, deprivation of suckling milk and milk replacer, high infection pressure, pain caused by mutilations such as dehorning and castration without anaesthesia, transport of young un-weaned calves, lack of access to pasture.

The risks factors for the life of calves are linked to:

Management of

- Birth (cow housing conditions, feed and health management of the cow/heifer prior to calving, and calving)
- Colostrum
 - first colostrum feed via nipple after max. 2 hours
 - determining protein concentration of colostrum with brixmeter (veterinarian)
 - minimising bacterial contamination of colostrum and equipment (cleaning udder before milking, preparing colostrum and cleaning equipment in a hygienic facility)
 - Pasteurising, freezing/defrosting colostrum
 - defining duration and quantity of colostrum provided to calves
- navel treatment (disinfection and hygiene of the environment)
- feeding (e.g. satisfying calves' biologic sucking behaviour; frequency and quantity of feeding milk, temperature of milk; amount, age and means of providing roughage and water; quality of roughage)
- o weaning (gradual, minimum age/weight, plan for weaning process (written instructions)
- housing and forage (dry bedding, avoid slatted and slippery floors, avoid draughts and wide temperature ranges)

In addition the risks are linked to

- buying and selling process
- health monitoring
- biosecurity
- training of staff

Specific risks for male dairy calves:

- The low or lack of market value of male dairy calves, resulting in poor health management.
- Moving calves from dairy to fattening farms at a too young age (<4 weeks) within the immunity gap with the following risk areas
 - fitness for transport of young calves,

- o management of groups upon arrival at the fattening farm,
- o biosecurity, feed and housing.
- Three examples of best practice management on fattening calves on Swedish farms are presented.
 - Health monitoring of calves on Swedish farms: inspections twice a day, preferably at time of milk feeding. Awareness for biosecurity, hygiene measures on farm for handling calves
- NL has put in place a mandatory calf health management system on farms > 5 animals.
- Collecting, monitoring and analysing data on calf health are key to improve the standard of health.
- 4. External expert Inge Santman-Berends presents on 'Young stock rearing data tools to support young stock rearing' developed by royal GD ahead in animal health

The expert presents on how data can help to monitor and improve the quality of young stock rearing.

Analysis of trends of the rate of mortality on Dutch dairy and calf fattening farms revealed that some farmers with high rates of mortality were either unaware of the problem, felt powerless towards it or were reluctant to change. Based on this analysis, three tools were developed:

- 2017 a mandatory calf tracking system (for moving calves from dairy farms to fattening farms).
- 2018 A quarterly mandatory surveillance of calf mortality.
- 2018 a voluntary tool with 15 key indicators ('KALF-OK')

'KALF-OK' routinely calculates and communicates calf mortalities to farmers and rewards farmers with a high quality of calf rearing. The system is financed both by the calf industry and by the Dutch Ministry of agriculture, nature and food safety

The system has a high rate of participation (90-95% of farmers).

KALF -OK characteristics:

- Use of objective and standardised key indicators to assess young stock health and the quality of rearing
- Available for all dairy herds.
- User friendly
- Reveals both strengths and weaknesses of calf health and welfare on farm.
- The restrictive use of antimicrobials is scored with lower scores than e.g. the mortality rate in order to not discourage farmers from treating ill calves if necessary.
- Due to the objectivity of the assessment and scoring, the results allow distinguishing between herds with high and low quality of calf rearing.
- Determines benchmarks: minimum value to achieve.
- Motivates farmers by communicating to them the survival rate opposed to the mortality rates of calves of specific age groups
- Rewards farmers with good results.

Indicators:

- Key birth and rearing indicators:
 - O Live birth: $\frac{calves\ born\ alive}{calvings}$
 - Successful rearing of calves ≤ 14 days (differentiating between bull and heifer calves)
 - Successful rearing of calves 15-56 days old: calves alive at day 56 calves alive between 15-56 days
 Successful rearing 56 days 2 years: calves alive at year 2 calves alive 56 days-2years
- Key indicators of antimicrobial usage for calves <56 days, and calves between 56 days-2 years (AMU for respiratory diseases, diarrhoea and other issues)
- Key herd health indicators regarding status of BVD/IBR, salmonella, coccidiosis, cryptosporidiosis, and closed farm systems are also used.

Advantages:

- Availability of a wide range of data of high quality
- information is provided to farmers on a regular basis
- Awareness is raised for farmers and connected businesses and industry, enhancing the improvement of calf health
- Makes changes visible

5. Discussion on the key animal welfare aspects of the presentations

- Calf health and welfare are closely linked and must be addressed jointly
- Calf fattening management is organised diversely within the EU, depending on the presence of a market/industry for veal within the Member State
- The low value of male dairy calves leads to a deficient colostrum and milk feeding management for bull calves, resulting in discrepancies in the rate of mortality of heifer or bull calves.
- Considerable differences of calf health can be observed between farms based on the degree of training of staff towards colostrum management, linked e.g. to
 - the use of pasteurisation and refrigeration of colostrum,
 - A regular assessment of the microbiological quality.
 - o The availability of hygienic rooms for the handling of colostrum and its equipment
 - o Measuring the content of protein in colostrum on a regular basis by the veterinarian
 - Vaccination of the dams before calving
- At present it lacks specific guidelines for colostrum management, these however would be relevant to close farmers' knowledge gap.
- The official mortality rate of calves on farm differs considerably across the Member States (MS) depending on the systems of registration
 - o In most MS calves are registered when ear-tagged
 - The maximum age for tagging however differs considerably between the MS.
 - o In the NL abortions and deaths of calves after birth are also registered, statistically resulting in a higher calf mortality rate compared to other MS.

As to the KALF-ok system

- rewarding farmers and benchmarking farms are considered effective tools to increase the motivation of farmers to improve calf health and welfare.
- It is essential that veterinarians provide support and expertise to the farmers in this process.
- KALF-OK is available to farmers outside NL

6. Questions to the subgroup

Q1: Which parameters could help to define the adequate number of staff on farm to ensure AW?

The subgroup considers that the number of staff required on farm could be defined based on factors such as (structure of farms, degree of automatization, etc.). It however agrees that it would be most appropriate to define the number of staff required on farm based on its animal welfare outcome (i.e. rate of morbidity or mortality).

Q2: Would defining the duties of care for calves and the monitoring of their health in written procedures, or Standard operation procedures (SOPs) contribute to improving the standard of calf welfare?

The subgroup agrees that written instructions could contribute to improving the standard of calf health and welfare on farms. However, it addresses the risk of an additional administrative burden for farmers by introducing SOPs. The subgroup considers a mandatory health plan, as in place in some MS at present, an appropriate tool to in future improve the standard of animal health and welfare of calves on all farms, regardless of their size. The subgroup in addition suggests developing the health plan together with the veterinarian and combining it with training on farm.

Q3: Do you think that staff should be trained specifically for caring for newly born calves, e.g. colostrum management (hygiene, time and amount of feeding). Could the veterinarian be responsible for this training?

As expressed in the former meeting on training and competence of staff on farm of dairy and calf fattening farms, the subgroup supports an increase of training of farmers and stock people and the development of guidelines. In some MS farmers are provided training for this topic in workshops or by consultants.

7. Calendar for the next meetings

EU platform - 30 June-1st July 2022 - (specific point on welfare of calves and dairy cows on 1st July, 10:00-11:00)

Subgroups:

14 July 2022, 9:00 – 12:00 (hybrid meeting)
Calves: Feeding management for fattening calves

15 September 2022, 9:30 – 12:30 Mutilations

17 October 2022, 14:30 – 17:30

Housing systems for dairy cows, ban of tethering, outdoor access or access to fresh air

17 November 2022, 9:30 – 12:30 Indicators

15 December 2022, 9:30 – 12:30 Standard operating procedures