

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

Second meeting, 28 April 2022

(Videoconference)

– MINUTES –

### Attendance

<b>Independent expert</b>	Francesca Fusi
<b>Civil society organisations</b>	EDA Eurogroup Slow food
<b>Business and professional organisations</b>	Farm & Animal Health Copa Cogeca
<b>Member States</b>	Sweden The Netherlands Ireland
<b>European Commission</b>	DG SANTE – Colleagues from Unit G5, F2
<b>Guest</b>	Contractor EY, Cees Jan Hollander

## 1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed participants and the guest Cees Jan Hollander

2. The Commission presented briefly the topic of the meeting of group housing calves.
  - a. Legal requirements for housing calves in groups
  - b. Implications of ECI 'end of cage age' for future legislation on individual housing of calves
  - c. EFSA mandate for calves

## 3. Expert, Cees Jan Hollander presents Danone's pilot project 'programme farming for generation' in Romania

The main reason for individual housing to date is mainstream advice for prevention of diseases. Romanian farmers that participated in the pilot project 'programme farming for generation' were prepared to group house calves. It was essential to provide the farmers with scientific data and guidance by support bodies they trusted to convince them of participating in the project.

Pilot details: all in all out system, 4 groups of 5 calves of similar size and age per group, calves were grouped after 14 days, space allowance per calf was 1,6 m<sup>2</sup>, calves were fed 900 -1000 g milk powder/day and had free access to water, inspections were carried out twice a day. Calves were scored on a regular basis.

Results of pilot project group housing comparing non- grouped and grouped calves.

Grouped calves:

- a. more content animals
- b. increased weight gains, calves eating solid material sooner.
- c. improved health, reduced use of antimicrobials (<5%)
- d. less workload
- e. decrease in vet costs by 10%
- f. in the long run the milk yield of grouped calves is higher than that of individually housed calves

## 4. Eurogroup's presentation on housing of calves

The presentation showed that group housed calves end up to be stronger and less cross suckling is observed.

Recommendations made in the presentation for group housed calves:

- the age gap between these calves should not be larger than 5 days;
- group housed calves should preferably be fed 'ad libitum' 6 x 2 litres/day until day 40;
- minimum 3 meals per day minimum 2,5 litres per meal to satisfy suckling needs for first 14 days, also for automatic drinkers;
- Milk can be gradually reduced until day 70 to 80, then calves are weaned;
- Roughage and water from first week onward;

The presentation concluded that calves in groups stimulate each other to eat, positive effect increasing growth rate.

Recommendation for group sizes:

- Size of group seems to be critical for success;
- Larger groups require more management skills;
- Smaller groups are easier to manage, help reduce the age gap, and improve health of calves (smaller groups not larger than 6 animals or pairs)

Other relevant issues:

- Effective ventilation is necessary if indoors; outdoor is preferable for calves;
- Cold stress must be managed outdoors.

Advantages of group housing versus individual housing:

- Improved physical wellbeing;
- Improved mental wellbeing;
- Option to perform natural behaviour.

Examples for visual and tactile contact between calves in individual pens.

- Adapted old crates or igloos;
- Individual huts with connected outdoor pens.

The age of grouped calves should be gradually reduced.

## **5. Discussion on the conditions for the transition from individually to group housed calves:**

The main considerations expressed by members during the discussion can be summarised as follows:

- It will be key for the transition phase from individual to group housing calves that farmers are given the chance to change their mind set, especially as to risks of group housing for health reasons.
- Farmers need to understand the economic and environmental gains of the change and should be guided by support bodies in the process of transition.
- Farmers should be given the chance to start grouping older calves and gradually reduce their age and will require a long transition phase to successfully accomplish this change.
- EFSA's scientific opinion is required to determine at which minimum age calves can be group housed.
- Flexibility for the transition period will be required especially for small and medium size farms.
- The complexity of farms must be considered (small, medium and large scale farms).
- On small farms with few calves, animals can be held in pairs or with the dam or grandmother, or calves can be partially grouped and separated if required (e.g. for night, feeding).
- Small groups < 10 calves are key for the success of group housing.
- Central feeding systems will facilitate feeding.
- Animal based indicators will support to assess the welfare and health of group house calves.
- Providing enough space for each calf in group housing is key for its growth rate and weight gain.
- The age gap between group housed calves should not be more than 5 days.
- Housing calves outdoors in groups has a positive effect on their health and development, if they are protected from thermal stress and intensely monitored assessing animal based indicators.
- Staff on farms will require intensive training to cope with the challenges of group housing

## **6. Calendar for the next meetings**

**20 May 2022**, 14:00 to 17:00

Competence of stock-people on dairy farms and calve fattening farms, training requirements

**16 June 2022**, 9:30 to 12:30

Health Management for

a) calves after birth (examples of good practice for new born calves, e.g. housing, calf- dam bonding, regular examinations)

b) calves when moved from dairy to fattening farm (examples of good practice e.g. relevance of all in – all out systems)

**14 July 2022**, 9:00 – 12:00

Calves: Feeding management for suckling and fattening calves (examples of good practice incl. training and requirements for staff)

