Quality Management Systems for Dairy Farming – Opportunity and Challenges for Recording Organisations

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Abstract

In the European Union there is a strong increase in labelling systems for branding agricultural products and of course heavy competition in the food market. This has lead to some demand driven changes in the agricultural production in general and especially in the cattle and dairy business. About a decade ago it was enough, if milk full filled the quality defined by law to be sold to the dairy. With the ending of the European Quota scheme, production and competition have significantly increased. Nowadays each food company is seeking its unique selling preposition by defining production conditions and checking them on farm and during the whole process from the stable to the shelf in the supermarket.

For milk recording and breeding organisations this leads to new challenges in the business. Being a service provider within the food sector, we now face customers, who have contracts for defined feeding schemes like GMO-free production, which prohibits the use of some animal feed, or have to full fill special housing or animal welfare conditions to sell their products, hopefully to a better price.

All ICAR members are focused on providing best services to their customers in terms of data collection and processing for breeding and management purposes. In the past this helped our farmers to gain competitive advantages over their neighbors. Now it is not enough to just provide somatic cell counts of the cows and tell the farmer how to keep his herd in best udder health to produce and sell high quality milk or how to use best estimated breeding values for selection decisions in his herd.

Food quality and labelling schemes require at least a clear documentation about the situation on farm and need action plans if imbalances occur. Both things are very common to recording organisations, so it seems to be highly necessary to develop new services and to provide benchmarks for such common things like udder health, fertility, animal welfare and production efficiency. We are challenged to discuss our knowledge with the food industry and even with the consumers, who like to buy top quality food originating in the sheds of our customers. In

this area we are facing a really different kind of question much more focused on animal welfare and health and the way the farmer cares about his/her herd and the impact on food quality.

It is time for milk recording organisations together with ICAR to be more visible and therefore recognised within the food industry as examples from selected countries show. But there is an even stronger need, that agricultural organisations start to define some kind of best practice for dairy and beef production, which is based on the highly experienced knowledge gathered over generations within ICAR and its bodies and provides some sustainable answers where breeding and selection is sure part of it. But the necessary data volume and quality can only be collected in future if the income of the farmer is assured by best possible management support by the recording organisations.