

Mapping the global use of welfare indicators for dairy cows

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The welfare of all farmed livestock, including dairy cattle, is an issue that is of concern for farmers, consumers and policy makers across the world. Welfare is considered a multidimensional property of the animal that includes health, functional fitness, behaviour and psychological well-being. In recent years, there has been a great deal of research across the world into developing and validating reliable methods of assessing animal welfare. These welfare indicators may be included in welfare-only assessment schemes, or as part of a breeding scheme or an overall farm assessment programmes. Welfare assessment schemes can use both resource-based measures (assessment of the quality of the housing and management) and animal-based measures (direct measures made on the individual animal).

Currently, there is little coordination across organisations or countries in the types of health and welfare indicators assessed, nor in the measurement methods or scoring systems used to assess these indicators. Coordination and integration across organisations would improve uptake of welfare scoring. The most practical and reliable scoring methods could be identified, which would aid companies starting new welfare recording programmes. Ultimately, this will improve the welfare of animals and consumer confidence in livestock farming. Standardisation of the indicators assessed and the scoring methods used would also facilitate integration of welfare indicator information with other types of animal data, such as production and fitness data from herd improvement schemes. As a first step in the coordination process, the ICAR Working Group on Functional Traits has initiated a project to map the welfare indicators used by organisations assessing health and welfare across the globe.

This is being done using a two-step process. The first step was to identify the key personnel in organisations recording welfare traits, so that detailed surveys could be sent directly to them. This was done by asking ICAR members and other welfare experts to provide contact details of key personnel in organisations involved in dairy cow welfare assessment. This yielded a list of 42 people from 24 countries across the world. More will be added by snowball sampling. The key personnel will be asked to take part in a survey which will ask what health and welfare indicators are assessed and what recording methods are used to record them. There are three parts to the survey which address different classes of health and welfare traits: 1. Disease indicators; 2. Body condition, injuries and cleanliness and 3. Temperament, behaviour and other traits. Information on the number of farms or animals scored and data storage will also be collected. The surveys were conducted in spring 2019. The data will be collated and presented at the ICAR conference in June 2019. This results of the survey will provide information on the global extent of health and welfare recording, what indicators are used most frequently and on the scoring systems that are seen as most practical and reliable.

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