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Measures to monitor and improve claw health, lameness and animal welfare in Austrian dairy farms

Marlene Suntinger¹, Johann Kofler², Robert Pesenhofer³, Christoph Winckler⁴, Christa Egger-Danner¹

¹ZuchtData EDV-Dienstleistungen GmbH, Vienna, Austria

²University Clinic for Ruminants, Department for Farm Animals and Veterinary Public Health, University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna, Austria

³Federation of Austrian Claw Trimmers, Hitzendorf/Styria, Austria

⁴Department of Sustainable Agricultural Systems, Division of Livestock Sciences, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (Boku), Vienna, Austria

Good claw health is a prerequisite for safeguarding animal welfare as well as efficient and economic dairy production. In Austria, since 2006 veterinary diagnoses related to claw alterations and diseases of the lower limb are routinely recorded in the central cattle database (RDV) together with other production disease diagnoses. However, different studies showed that the veterinarian diagnoses only cover records of cows with quite severe claw disorders. In contrast, data from claw trimming proved to be a valuable source of information to map claw health in a more comprehensive and continuous way. With the aim to improve claw health and animal welfare efficiently, data pipelines for claw trimming data, cow individual data on lameness and other animal-based welfare indicators related to leg health in Austrian dairy herds are currently being established within the project “Klauen-Q-Wohl”. This program was initiated by the Federation of Austrian cattle breeding in cooperation with the Federation of Austrian claw trimmers. Data logistics are being established that allow a very precise documentation by the claw trimmers as well as recording claw trimming information on a more general way by the farmers. This information is incorporated in a scheme to monitor welfare and advice on measures for improvement. The tool to improve claw health and welfare with focus on claw health and lameness related welfare aspects is based on farm individual risk factors and results from benchmarking. The so far established infrastructure for ICAR-standardized, electronic documentation of claw trimming data enables claw trimmers to send claw disorders by a single click via an interface to the RDV. Next to this, the infrastructure allows claw trimmers to recall animal information covering animal-ID, lactation number and stage of their supervised farms to their claw documentation software before trimming. This feature accelerates electronic documentation and ensures correct animal identification. So far, forty trained and certified claw trimmers have joined the project. First experiences indicate that the advice provided to farms as well as farm management gains in quality. Once the data has been stored in the RDV, the farmer has access to this data via online herd management programs and/or a mobile app at all times. Claw health and welfare data will be used to provide practical herd management solutions for farmers to promote the improvement of animal health as well as for breeding value estimation for claw and claw related health traits.

Keywords: claw health, animal welfare, lameness, claw trimming, herd management, decision support, data logistics, advisory tool, risk factors