

Working group report:

Dairy farms: constraints and recommendations for enhancing health, welfare and food safety

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The group was split in three subgroups focussing, in the first instance, on identifying the problems dairy farmers have to deal with in allocating scarce financial resources. All subgroups joined to identify solutions.

The following problems were identified:

Subsidies can be a problem because:

- State of development of organic market has impact on milk price and farm income ; and
- There is a lack of policy support for milk production compared with other enterprises .

Marketing is often a problem as:

- State of development of organic market has impact on income;
- Low milk price leaves little profit (it was noted, however, that in most cases dairy farmers are better off than beef and sheep farmers).
- Some of the produce end up in the conventional markets (milk, meat);
- We need to understand how to build up the market for organic products; and
- Social benefits of organic farming are not yet marketed.

Regulations cause problems as:

- There are differences in the implementation of livestock regulation between European countries;
- Interpretation of the standards varies, even by different inspectors of control bodies within the same country or region;
- Investments for housing that meets standard requirements can be a big problem (three different problems were pointed out: no access to pasture, robot milking in combination with cow traffic and tethered housing systems);
- 100% organic rations will increase feeding cost considerably in several countries;
- Some organic systems with high milk yields and high intensity require higher concentrate inputs than allowed.
- There are clear conflicts between the standards and the product quality; e.g. mastitis/dry cow therapy and somatic cell counts, nursing cows and Johne's disease etc.
- Specific problems with intake of fresh grass while grazing in Sweden (local standards require that this is 50% of dry matter intake during summer).

With regard to farm resources, the following problems were identified:

- Further breeding and existing high prevalence of Holstein-Friesian and/or high yielding cows that are not adapted to "organic" rations, especially in early lactation;
- There is less income from selling animals as breeding stock if the herd is not high yielding;
- Intensive farms with high stocking rates need more land when converting to organic in order to maintain same herd size with a reduced stocking rate.

Information provision for organic dairy systems is problematic as:

- You are dealing with a complex system – holistic systems require information about the system as a whole, not only the underlying parts.
- Attitudes of veterinarians to organic dairying as a system, and especially towards alternative therapy, are sceptical; and
- With few research supporting the use of alternative therapy the use is considered to be problematic.

The following solutions were suggested:

Figure 1 presents the influences/interests of stakeholders on the different chains in organic dairy system. The different lines and arrows stands for different functions in the total dairy chain. The stakeholders are described by function or influence in CAPITAL LETTERS.

In regard to subsidies:

- They should not only be based on the number of animals or areas cultivated but should support good practise, e.g. good animal welfare and inclusion of all-day grazing could attract higher payments (it was, however, pointed out that the judgement of animal welfare could be difficult, and further research would be needed).

As far as marketing is concerned:

- Understanding the consumer is important, i.e. what does she/he want and what does she/he expect from organic products and organic farming? Why do they buy organic products and have different motives for different product groups?
- Differentiation of markets and marketing strategies could help, i.e. change communication about organics and move towards new and innovative products.

In order to solve the problems with regulations:

- Preventive management (system approach) should be promoted in favour of specific input substitution.

In terms of farm resources:

- Money was seen as an/the instrument for achieving change, e.g. giving bonuses for good (low somatic cell counts) and penalties for bad (high somatic cell counts) management;
- More research is needed to define animal welfare and product quality; and
- Breeding aims should be identified by the farmer for his specific circumstances. Breeding results should be evaluated under organic conditions to clarify the suitability of breeds for organic farms.

With regard to information:

- It is necessary to improve the information to the public (who are the taxpayer and pay the subsidies) about organic farming as a system, that improves animal health and welfare
- Consumers must get accurate information about the organic products they buy.
- Producers should be informed about organic farming before they convert (so they know what to expect): they should be told about the regulations and pointed to the available information about organic farming.
- Veterinarians should be informed (part of the teaching curriculum in vet schools) about the holistic system, the importance of preventive health management on organic farms and about alternative treatments.
- In communication to the policy makers (the government), organic farming should be presented as a different farming system and not as a conventional system with some alteration.