



# Large scale farming with an emphasis on dairy production

## Farm size, intensification and welfare

Large scale production of any farm animal species is a controversial issue. There is often concern that by scaling up the farm enterprise, the welfare of the animals will inevitably suffer, and the animals will be viewed as mere commodities. Where conditions and/or management are inadequate, welfare can clearly be compromised. However, this is the case for all sizes of farm – large and small. It is not the scale of production that, in itself, has an impact on welfare, but the conditions under which the animals are kept.

The RSPCA is against intensive farming, where the management of the animals hinders the performance of normal behaviours to such an extent that welfare is compromised. Intensive conditions can be found on all sizes of farm and hence, welfare can be poor or good on both large and small farms.

The important question therefore is whether the welfare of each individual animal is properly catered for, rather than how large or small the flock/herd is.

The RSPCA welfare standards for dairy cattle (which have to be applied by members of the Society's higher welfare farm assurance scheme, RSPCA Assured) prohibit systems which house cattle indoors all year round. However, they do not set any limits on herd size because there is no welfare related evidence to indicate this is necessary. The RSPCA welfare standards, if applied in full, help ensure the wellbeing of each individual animal, regardless of the size of the herd.

Larger herds visited by the RSPCA have been housed in accommodation that has been purpose built for the modern dairy cow. Direct observation indicates that levels of comfort and welfare in these systems – when combined with excellent levels of stockmanship – can exceed those seen in older, traditional housing systems.

If something goes wrong on a larger farm, e.g. a

disease outbreak, or a problem with a water delivery system, then there is clearly a risk to the welfare of a greater number of animals than would be the case on a smaller farm. **This highlights the importance of ensuring that high standards of management and stockmanship are applied at all times on all farms and that contingency plans are in place to safeguard the welfare of all animals should an emergency arise.**

## Farming industry situation – current and future

Large scale dairy production is not common within the UK, with little evidence to indicate any clear upward trend in so-called 'mega-dairies'. At present, there are around 25 UK herds of over 750 animals out of a total of 9,827 dairy herds in England and Wales, according to the latest AHDB Dairy figures (June 2015)<sup>1</sup>. The average herd size is around 140 cows<sup>2</sup>.

A [report](#)<sup>3</sup> by DairyCo, Andersons Consultants and the University of Nottingham published in January 2013, on the 'Structure of the GB Dairy Farming Industry – what drives change?', stated there was no evidence to suggest that larger producers were forcing smaller producers out of business, and concluded that farm survival was more a function of management than size itself.

## Improving welfare – current and future

The RSPCA's focus is always on the welfare of each individual animal, regardless of the size of a farming enterprise. The Society was one of the first organisations to call for a National Dairy Cow Welfare Strategy, which is now in its eighth year. The Society continues to be involved in a number of dairy-based initiatives whose goal is to improve the welfare of the dairy cow in all sizes of herd, notably;

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- The Cattle Health and Welfare Group for England, which administers the National Dairy Cow Welfare Strategy.
- The Genetics Advisory Forum, which provides the tools for farmers to breed more robust cattle.
- The Healthy Feet project, where the aim was to develop strategies to help reduce dairy cow lameness.
- The AssureWel project, where the RSPCA, Soil Association and the University of Bristol developed a set of practical dairy cow welfare outcome measures, which it is hoped will eventually be adopted by the UK dairy industry.

The Society has also been co-sponsor of the National Cattle Mobility Event in the past, and has funded research projects relating to a number of dairy cow welfare issues.

## In summary:

- The welfare of farm animals on all sizes of farm can be good or poor, depending on the conditions and management provided.
- The welfare of each individual animal should always be safeguarded through ensuring species-specific physical and behavioural needs are met. This cannot be achieved under intensive conditions, regardless of the size of the flock/herd.
- High standards of management and stockmanship need to be applied at all times on all farms. Due to the larger numbers of animals involved on big farms, preventative measures and contingency plans relating to emergencies and disease control must take account of the particular challenges posed by the scale of the enterprise.
- Efforts must continue to ensure on-going improvement in the welfare of dairy cattle – and other farmed species – on all sizes of farm through a range of initiatives.

## References

<sup>1</sup> **AHDB Dairy (2016) Dairy statistics: An insider's guide 2016.** Available from: [https://dairy.ahdb.org.uk/resources-library/market-information/dairy-statistics/dairy-statistics-an-insiders-guide-2016/#.WxZYZ\\_kvxpq](https://dairy.ahdb.org.uk/resources-library/market-information/dairy-statistics/dairy-statistics-an-insiders-guide-2016/#.WxZYZ_kvxpq)

<sup>1</sup> **AHDB Dairy (2017) Average Herd Size.** Available from: <https://dairy.ahdb.org.uk/resources-library/market-information/farming-data/average-herd-size/#.WW9GQPkrLcs>

<sup>2</sup> **DairyCo (2013) The structure of the GB dairy farming industry – what drives change?** Available from: [https://dairy.ahdb.org.uk/resources-library/market-information/industry-structure/the-structure-of-the-gb-dairy-farming-industry-what-drives-change/#.WxZpe\\_kvzcs](https://dairy.ahdb.org.uk/resources-library/market-information/industry-structure/the-structure-of-the-gb-dairy-farming-industry-what-drives-change/#.WxZpe_kvzcs)