A new model for corporate-driven animal welfare assessments: benchmarking cow comfort as a service for dairy farmers

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Corporations can play an important role in on-farm animal welfare assessments. To date most programs have focused on evaluating whether or not individual farms meet specific standards. We describe a novel approach to corporate involvement in on-farm animal welfare assessment, that provides farmers comparative data as a vehicle for engagement on issues of dairy cow management.

Approach: Novus International, Inc., in collaboration with the University of British Columbia, launched the C.O.W.S benchmarking project in 2010. C.O.W.S. provides producers (150 and counting) individualized reports on animal-based measures (including gait score, hock and knee injuries, and lying time and number of lying bouts) and facility-based measures (including aspects of free stall design, feeder design and management as well as other management practices including stocking density and bedding practices). The reports allow producers to compare their performance with others in their region and are the basis for a discussion with a Novus employee and others involved in the management of that farm (e.g. nutritionist and herd veterinarian).

Producers valued the detailed reports on their own farms, allowing them to make better-informed decisions and develop tailored strategies for improving the care and management of cows on their farm. For Novus, the C.O.W.S. program provides an opportunity for one-on-one engagement with producers and a halo effect from association with a valued service.