

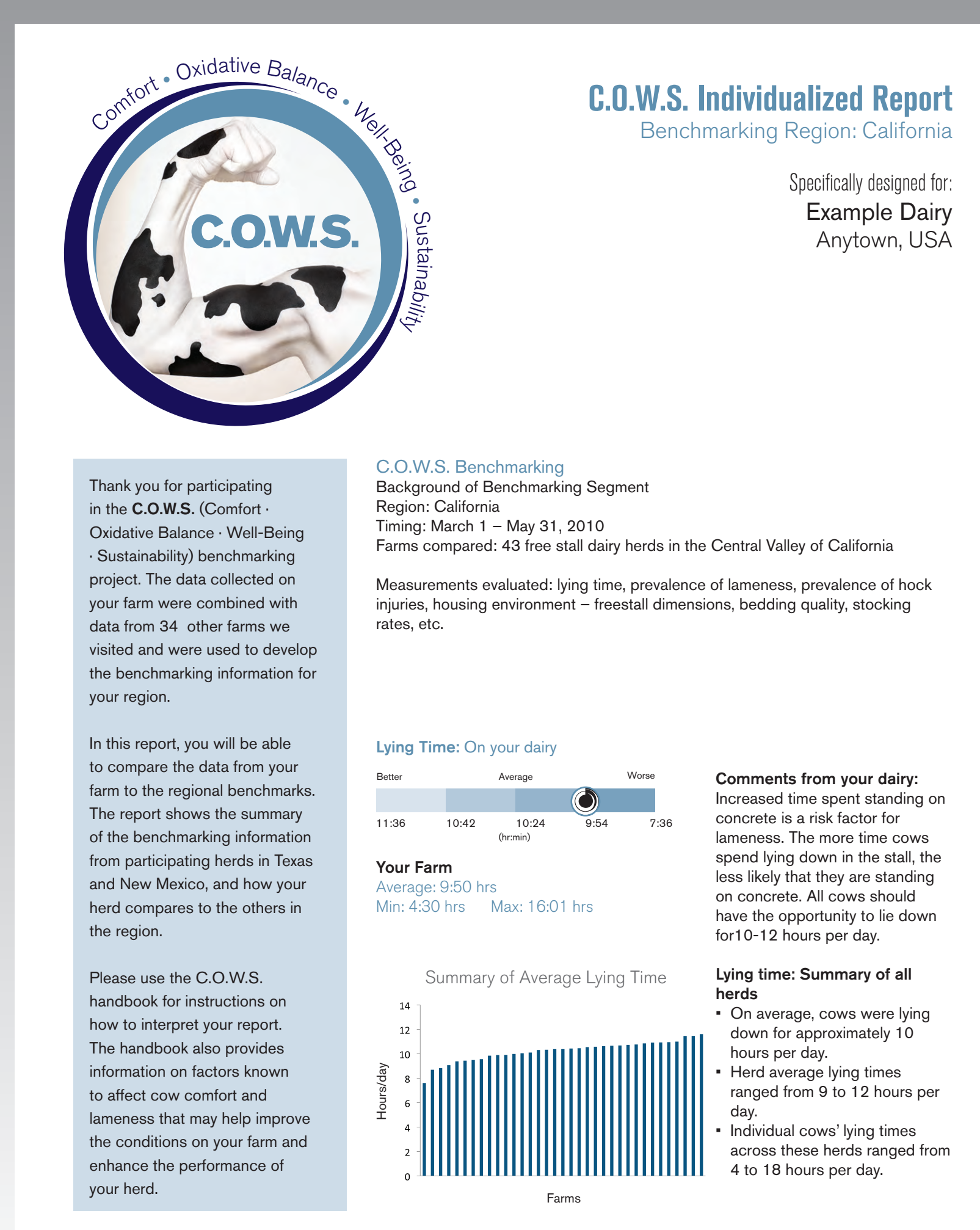
A new model for corporate-driven animal welfare assessments: benchmarking cow comfort as a service for dairy farmers

Marina von Keyserlingk, Ed Galo,
Stephanie Gable and Daniel Weary

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).

Producer reports



Benefits of the program in the words of the participants

"We recognize that cow comfort is important to maintaining high production. We also don't want to see cows that we've worked hard to raise leave prematurely because of factors we could have prevented. That's why we're looking to identify weaknesses in our housing and our management that we can correct."

-Dairy Farmer

"I think we all tend to be a bit biased towards our own facilities and management. We assume this is as good as it gets, or this is all I'm capable of. But the C.O.W.S. program provides us with an independent unbiased perspective that's important to help us identify areas of improvement that we might not recognize on our own."

-Dairy Farmer



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.

"The way UBC has gone about evaluating lameness through the two dairy farms that I had participate in the C.O.W.S. program from Novus was eye-opening for both me and my clients. The science-based evaluation of lameness they have developed has shown that what we once accepted as normal shouldn't be viewed as normal."

-Nutritionist

"Cow comfort is crucial both from the perspective of dairy profitability and animal welfare, which is becoming an increasingly important issue for producers and the industry. Our clinic had five farms participate in the C.O.W.S. program, ranging in size from 200 cows to 800 cows. All of the operations had a very positive experience."

-Veterinarian