We thank Peter Danielson and the NERD group (University of British Columbia) for support in developing YourViews and Genome Canada and Genome BC for original funding of the platform. B. Ventura is supported by a UBC fellowship through the Faculty of Land and Food Systems.

**Objective**

To elicit stakeholder views on controversial dairy practices, using cow-calf separation as a case study.

**Introduction**

- People are increasingly interested in the welfare of animals raised for food production.
- Public acceptance of production practices is integral to the social sustainability of the dairy industry.
- The dairy industry needs mechanisms to facilitate discussion of contentious issues among diverse groups and improve public engagement.

**Methods**

- 163 participants randomly assigned to 4 independent groups on the "Your Views" interactive online forum.
- Participants given background information on separation and asked, "Should dairy calves be separated from the cow within the first few hours after birth?"
- Participants provided a 'yes', 'no', or 'neutral' response and wrote a reason (or chose reasons left by prior participants) to explain their decision.
- Responses and demographics were summarized using PROC FREQ in SAS v. 9.3.
- Reasons were grouped into themes using qualitative coding analysis.

**Quantitative Results**

Overall, there was little consensus among participants about early separation:

- 44% supported ('yes')
- 48% opposed ('no')
- 9% were neutral

**Qualitative Results**

**Reasons in support of early separation included:**

- "otherwise there is too much attachment, and it’s very hard on the mother" (cow and calf emotions)
- "separating calves from cows at birth provides a means to break disease transmission" (calf health)
- "Cows tend to hold their milk...because [they want] to give it to [their] calf...Cows can get very sick if they don’t release their milk. A sick cow versus early separation is not the best option" (calf health)
- "it’s just not feasible on the current structure [of the industry] to keep calves with cows for no real reason" (farm potential)

**Reasons against early separation included:**

- "cows benefit by forming a bond with their calf" (cow and calf emotions)
- "early separation does not work in preventing disease; current methods ...still result in high levels of disease in dairy calves" (calf health)
- "the production of milk depends on the contentment of the cow...I believe a happy cow (allowed to stay with her calf) produces more milk" (cow health)
- "consideration should be made into farm design that accommodates both the cow-calf relationship and production efficiency" (farm potential)

**Conclusions**

* Participants differed in their support for early separation, with similar numbers of supporters and opponents.
* Responses varied greatly with demographics, but participants often invoked similar themes to defend their different viewpoints.
* This study illustrates the value of online forums in identifying areas of shared concern, providing a first step toward improved engagement.