Online engagement on contentious issues in dairying: Should dairy cows have access to pasture?

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Introduction

- The public are generally positive about the dairy industry, but criticisms have surfaced.
- Loss of naturalness, including decreased access to pasture is one concern (Boogard et al. 2008).
- In 2007, only 5.1% of all lactating cows in the U.S. were housed primarily on pasture; 33% of cows had some access in the summer (NAHMS 2007).
- Thus, the dairy industry may be falling out of step with public expectations.

Objective: To elicit stakeholder views about whether or not dairy cows should have access to pasture.

Methods

- 222 participants randomly assigned to 7 independent groups on the “Your Views” Interactive online forum.
- Participants were given background information on housing cows indoors versus on pasture and asked, “Should dairy cows be provided access to pasture?”
- 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 analyzed to identify common themes using qualitative coding analysis.

Responses

Proponents of pasture access:

1. Cows should experience a natural life
   “...every being deserves to feel sunshine on her back, to feel earth beneath her feet, to breathe fresh air.”
2. Pasture improves cow health
   “…pasture can help reduce the incidence of hoof problems such as lameness and sole ulcers if the pastures are kept in good condition.”
3. Grazing improves sustainability
   “Rotational grazing gives high production and the cheapest, most environmentally friendly sunlight harvest and fertilizing/waste removal/treatment.”

Neutral:

1. Pasture is good but implementation depends on a variety of factors such as geography, weather, and size of farm
   “Certain farms have the ability to pasture successfully. Other farms are lacking in the amount and quality of pasture and would be better suited to provide comfortable, indoor housing year round.”
2. There are pros and cons to the environment and animal welfare
   “It might be a good idea in some cases, but not always possible. Housing and management practices should be the most adequate for cow’s comfort and health. Additionally, I am not sure how much grazing would be more environmentally sustainable compared with a well designed and well managed confinement system.”

Opponents of pasture access:

1. Confinement systems are good for cows because they meet all the needs of cows
   “Pasture is not necessary provided that you have an environment that addresses cow comfort issues (adequate water, adequate bunk space, adequate stall space, and adequate ventilation.”
2. Pasture does not meet the dietary needs of lactating cows
   “Today’s cow isn’t able to consume the nutrients necessary to support her level of production from pasture alone.”

Fig. 1: Participant responses to the question, “Should dairy cows be provided access to pasture?” varied according to demographics.

Themes and Corresponding Quotes

Conclusions

- Providing access to more natural living conditions, including pasture, was viewed as important for many participants; very few participants opposed pasture access.
- Some participants struggled with the issue, recognizing the value of pasture as well as constraints in implementing grazing-based systems.
- The concept of pasture access goes beyond eating grass; research should explore attitudes to systems that allow cows access to more natural environments and indoor housing.

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References:

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