



IDF World Dairy Summit
United Dairy World 2009
BERLIN 20-24 SEPTEMBER

Conference 03 – Animal Health & Animal Welfare

IDF's position and activities on animal welfare and their implications for less economically developed countries (challenges and opportunities)

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Globally, animal welfare is now seen as a core component of dairy production by the member countries of the International Dairy Federation (IDF). It has been recognised that the wellbeing of humans is closely linked to that of animals and that a secure and safe supply of protein rich food for people, is directly related to the optimal care and nutrition of livestock.

As the human population has escalated over the past few decades, the increasing need for food has resulted in increased production and the highly technical management of individual dairy animals. Most dairy animals are cows, but goats, sheep, camels and even horses produce milk for human consumption. Even in developing countries, where technology may be limited, novel ways of producing milk are increasing outputs. Many developing countries have marginal soils, unsuitable for crop cultivation, but yielding fibrous grasses that can be turned into edible proteins, in the form of milk, by ruminants like cows and goats.

The global increase in dairy production has raised a wide range of ethical and emotive issues, including animal welfare. It is essential, however, that norms for dairy animal welfare should be based on sound science and this is the position that has been taken, not only by the IDF, but also by international organisations such as the OIE (International Organisation for Animal Health) and the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations). This means that all aspects of the welfare of dairy animals; including management, disease control, feeding, housing, handling, transportation and ultimately, humane euthanasia, should be based on research that is conducted by accredited institutions and published in peer reviewed journals.

The IDF, which includes 53 member countries and represents 82% of the global milk production, has responded in a proactive way to these challenges and opportunities. As far back as 2003, the IDF produced a fact sheet on dairy animal welfare. It was followed in 2004 by the joint FAO/IDF "Guide to Good Dairy Farming Practice", published online



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and in hard copy, as a template that could be used by dairy producers worldwide, to benchmark good farming practices, including those that promote the wellbeing of their dairy animals. In September 2008, the IDF followed with the “IDF Guide to Good Animal Welfare in Dairy Production”. This publication, free of charge for download from the internet, is recognised as the gold standard for the welfare of dairy animals globally. In the Foreword, Bernard Vallet, the Director General of the OIE, wrote “The IDF Guide to Good Animal Welfare in Dairy Production represents an important step in raising producers awareness of animal welfare and encouraging them to incorporate relevant requirements within their overall responsibility for the health of their dairy herds.” IDF strongly supports the OIE guidelines on livestock transport and humane euthanasia and, in partnership with the OIE, is currently developing specific dairy animal welfare guidelines, for publication in the Terrestrial Animal Code.

In 2009, the FAO established an online portal for livestock welfare and the IDF is featured prominently as one of the participating organisations. This “Gateway” is a participatory platform that allows users to retrieve or submit information. The aim is to provide a single access point for information related to farm animal welfare and it thus enables queries and contributions from both economically developed and developing nations. It is very much in line with the proactive stance of the IDF, which supports dialogue and partnership between agricultural producers, processors, consumers, communities, animal welfare groups, industries, researchers, veterinarians and governments for global implementation of dairy animal welfare.

In less developed countries, the wellbeing of humans is intricately linked to the welfare of their livestock. For the small-scale farmer the death of a single cow or loss of milk production or fertility can be a catastrophic blow. Because the production systems are often extensive, welfare challenges are different to those in more intensive systems and include drought, tropical diseases, predation by wild animals, stock theft and conflict situations. It is therefore difficult to standardise dairy animal welfare criteria globally. Regional production systems, cultures and climates must be taken into account. The wide diversity of member countries and the partnerships with the FAO and OIE allow the IDF to play a significant role in empowering less developed nations to apply relevant science based criteria to improve the welfare of dairy animals within their own farming systems.