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NGO and consumer perspectives: social influences on animal welfare and implications for the dairy sector

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Polls in many countries consistently show that a majority of people is concerned about the welfare of farm animals, and this is reflected in the support for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) campaigning for improvements in treatment of livestock. For example, the World Society for the Protection of Animals has over 1000 member societies in over 150 countries and one of those, The Humane Society of the United States, has over 11 million supporters. Many people express this concern through purchasing certain products, with increasing sales in developed countries of dairy products that are certified organic or humane (including in the programmes led by NGOs such as Freedom Food). This market also provides a small but increasing opportunity for exports from developing countries. There is recognition of this concern in legislation – particularly in Europe – and in initiatives by inter-governmental organisations. Such changes, together with positive approaches from the dairy industry, can make real improvements to the welfare of dairy cows and justified benefits to the image of dairy production. However, there are also problems and risks for welfare as recently highlighted by the European Food Safety Authority. These are particularly acute in relation to the environmental impacts of dairy production, which overlap with effects on welfare. Increases in production are often associated with intensification and negative effects on both the environment and welfare, and current trends are for these effects to increase further. To minimise such negative effects and maximise positive effects on the environment and animal welfare, and to safeguard its reputation for doing so, the dairy sector needs to take a strong stance on all three elements of sustainable production: economic, environmental and ethical.