

SOUTH AFRICA

IMPLEMENTING MEASURES TO IMPROVE THE WELFARE OF DAIRY CALVES IN SOUTH AFRICA

The production of calves, surplus to replacement needs, is an unavoidable feature of dairy farming and must be dealt with in a responsible and acceptable way.

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Summary

Location: South Africa

IDF Welfare Action Area: Husbandry practices

The measures discussed in this document relates primarily to the humane handling of un-weaned calves

UN SDGs

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”

Mahatma Gandhi

The uptake of the Calf Seller/Buyer Agreements has already started to show an improvement in the transport standards.

BENEFICIARIES OF THE ACTIONS

It is impossible to put a monetary value on our inputs, but the value in terms of improved public perception is immense.

The main beneficiaries of this program are the dairy livestock through improved welfare awareness on the farms.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Other areas of dairy cattle welfare that will require attention in future are:

1. Promoting the use of anti-inflammatory drugs as standard during painful procedures and conditions.
2. Control and treatment of lameness in dairy cattle
3. Heat stress mitigating measures
4. Promoting twin/group calf housing systems
5. Promoting the use of teats rather than buckets to feed calves to fulfil their need to suckle.

REFERENCES

1. SANS 1694:2018 – The Welfare of Dairy Cattle – Published by the South African Bureau of Standards
2. SANS 1488:2014 – Humane Transport of Livestock by Road Cattle – Published by the South African Bureau of Standards
3. Code of Practice for Milk Producers – Produced by the Dairy Standard Agency https://dairy-standard.co.za/images/downloads/COP/DSA_Code%20of%20Practice%20for%20Milk%20Producers%202022.pdf

INTRODUCTION

The practice that is most likely to cause a negative public perception of the dairy industry is the rearing, transport and slaughter of excess dairy calves, especially bull calves (commonly referred to as bobby calves). On dairy farms there is very little use for bull calves. As a result, farmers wish to dispose of them as soon as possible. Measures can be implemented to ensure the humane handling of bobby calves.

AIM

The aim is to improve the welfare of dairy calves over the next 5 years in a way that is measurable.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Dairy farm audits - The Dairy Standard Agency's (DSA) dairy farm audits include a section on the housing, handling, feeding and welfare of dairy calves. The vast majority of audited farms comply with 95 % of the standards. We have noticed a vast improvement on farms that are audited.
2. Revising the minimum standards of welfare for dairy calves – The current South African National Standards on the Welfare of dairy cattle is due for revision. Milk SA is pro-actively involved in the revision process.
3. Calf Seller/Buyer Agreements – By distributing a standard Calf Seller/

Buyer Agreement to dairy farmers, we hope raise farmer and calf buyer awareness of the minimum standards to adhere to when transporting un-weaned stock.

4. Calf welfare assessments - The DSA dairy auditors will be issued with an extensive list of welfare standards to assess on every farm that is audited from 2024. The farmer will then be asked which areas of non-compliance he feels comfortable and able to improve over the next year. His commitment will be recorded and these areas will be re-assessed at the next annual audit to see if he has managed to comply with the agreed improvements. This process will be repeated annually and the results will be collated to assess the percentage improvement achieved against the set targets every year

SUCCESSES

The difference in the level of compliance with minimum standards are noticeable when one visits a farm that is not currently participating in the DSA's dairy farm audit program. Farms that are audited for the first time generally score significantly lower than farms that have been audited at least twice. The willingness of farmers to comply with the audited standards is evident by the second audit already.



Fig 1. Calves are the replacement stock of a dairy enterprise. Treating them humanely is a worthwhile investment in the future of the dairy farm.



Fig 2. The housing and handling of dairy calves is a sensitive area of dairy animal welfare and needs to be handled with care.



Fig 3. The handling and transport of bobby calves remains the issue that is most likely to generate negative public reaction to the dairy industry and needs to be handled responsibly..



Fig 4. Paired calf housing is to be promoted as a preferred method to rear calves compared to single housing.