

FARM SIZE DOES NOT AFFECT CALF WELFARE

Calves on large farms are no better off or worse off than calves on small farms, concludes PhD candidate John Barry of Animal Production Systems. He investigated the welfare of calves on Irish dairy farms and developed a protocol for assessing and improving this.

'Farms have expanded fast since milk quotas were abolished in 2015,' says Barry. 'And the number of animals on the farms has grown accordingly. That could be a risk to their welfare simply because the farmer has less time per calf. One of the factors that have a big impact on calves' welfare is feeding just after they have been born. The first milk, known as colostrum, is

important in giving the calves immune cells. On most farms, the standard procedure is to mix the colostrum from the cows. Barry discovered that calves that were given mixed colostrum had less IgG (an important antibody) in their blood, but they still had enough. 'The disadvantage is the increased risk of transmitting diseases,' says Barry. 'If the mix contains colostrum from a sick cow, that can infect every calf that drinks it.'

PLAY

To assess the calves' well-being, Barry also investigated the relationship between the amount of space the beasts had and the mortality rate. 'It's often assumed that

large-scale livestock farming comes at the expense of welfare. My study shows that is not the case.' On average, the calves had twice as much space as the legal minimum of 1.5 square metres. Barry did find that calves kept in large groups played less, which could point to reduced well-being. Furthermore, there is a greater risk of disease spreading in a larger group.

The protocol that Barry has developed is designed for Ireland, but with a few changes it could also be applied internationally. Barry: 'It would be interesting to incorporate different techniques such as sensor technology. For example, you could use an automated feed

trough to keep track of how much an animal eats, which can give an indication of possible welfare problems.'  © TL

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