Abstract 12:

Dairy cattle welfare in spring-calving, pasture-based systems

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Little research has been conducted on dairy cattle welfare within the Irish spring-calving, pasture-based system. A welfare assessment was conducted on 82 Irish dairy farms to determine the herd-level prevalence of seven animal-based indicators of welfare and identify baseline performance benchmarks. Farms were visited during both the summer-grazing and winter-housing periods. At each visit, the 2019 milking herd was scored for body condition (BCS), locomotion, ocular and nasal discharge, tail injuries, integument damage, and avoidance response. For each indicator, the range in mean performance of the top (T) and bottom (B) 20% of farms was identified for grazing and housing. At grazing, farms displayed: 0-4% (T), 20-72% (B) of cows outside BCS targets; 1-5% (T), 15-32% (B) lameness; 0% (T), 79-96% (B) ocular discharge; 2-15% (T), 44-86% (B) nasal discharge; 0-3% (T), 2-52% (B) tail injuries; 0-2% (T), 12-29% (B) integument damage; 51-74% (T), 91-100% (B) avoidance response >1m. Similar levels of lameness, ocular discharge and tail injuries were observed between visits, however, significant differences were found for BCS, nasal discharge, integument damage and avoidance response. During housing, farms displayed: 4-12% (T), 33-71% (B) of cows outside BCS targets; 2-16% (T), 53-89% (B) nasal discharge; 4-14% (T), 29-49% (B) integument damage; 4-60% (T), 61-100% (B) avoidance response >1m. Performance of the top 20% of farms represents achievable targets that farms within the Irish dairy system should strive to meet or exceed. Continuation of this research focuses on determining risk factors for specific welfare problems to further improve dairy cattle well-being.