



Sustainable farms have lower costs; they spend less on the purchase of feed, among other things • Photo Shutterstock

Sustainable dairy farms are financially healthier

This conclusion comes from a study Wageningen Economic Research performed for the dairy sector organization ZuivelNL. In a group of some 200 dairy farms, the best-performing 25 per cent in the key Sustainable Dairy Sector areas of biodiversity, climate and degree of land use were compared with the remaining 75 per cent. The more sustainable group turned out to perform better financially too.

The sustainable farms had both lower costs and higher revenues, as a result of which their annual profits averaged 28,500 euros more than for the other farms, even though the sustainable farms were smaller on average. They produced an average of 838,000 kilos of milk per farm, while production at the remaining farms was 150,000 kilos higher.

Costs and benefits

The sustainable farms spent less on purchases of feed and the removal of manure (2.13 euros and 0.25 euros less per 100 kilos of milk respectively). That is largely due to the fact that they are less intensive, with more land per cow than the remaining farms. The sustainable farms produced almost 14,400 kilos of milk per hectare while the average for the other

farms was over 3,000 kilos higher.

The sustainable farms had relatively high revenues — a difference of 3.30 euros per 100 kilos of milk. Half of that difference is because they get a better price for sustainably produced milk, including through compensation from label organizations. The other half is explained by changes in stock levels and valuation and by payment rights (EU funding under the Common Agricultural Policy).

Cannot generalize

The sustainable farms tend to be found in Overijssel, Friesland and Groningen, provinces that suffer less from drought than other places. The farmers also tended to be older (aged 45 to 55), and therefore to have more experience and different financial burdens than their younger colleagues.

The research findings do not mean that it is financially attractive for all dairy farmers to make their farms more sustainable, warn the researchers. Specific farm characteristics such as loans, landholdings and barn capacity have a big influence on the outcome. 'Being an extensive farm is not the same as becoming one,' notes the report. ME

Animal diseases could return

If dairy farmers all switch to a more nature-inclusive approach, that may mean the return of animal diseases that are rarely seen on modern farms, as the pathogens could be reintroduced via wild animals. Not only are today's cows not robust enough to cope with

this, it is also a risk for humans as many diseases are zoonotic. This warning comes from Ad Koets, a researcher at Wageningen Bioveterinary Research. He is not opposed to a change of system, but he is calling for a different approach to disease symptoms among young

animals. 'At present, farmers see the symptoms as undesirable, but they are necessary to build up a robust immune system.' He also stresses the importance of properly monitoring pathogens in the natural environment so that appropriate measures can be taken in good time. ME