Organic Cow Comfort
-an advisory tool to secure animal welfare on organic dairy farms in Norway

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Abstract—Organic Cow Comfort is an advisory tool in animal welfare, developed to secure animal welfare on organic dairy farms in Norway. The farm advisory tool consists of:

- A farm visit by a veterinarian and a production advisor both specialized in animal welfare and organic farming
- An evaluation of herd health and welfare through welfare assessment
- Advice on disease prevention and improvement of animal welfare
- Follow up visit by an advisor looking at implementation of new initiatives
- Counselling meetings with groups of farmers

The evaluation of herd health and welfare is done with the help of checklists where animal based parameters, farm management and operating systems, and human-animal relationship are recorded. A report is prepared after every farm visit with a health and welfare plan where specific measures for improvement of animal welfare are outlined.

INTRODUCTION

One objective of organic farming is to ensure a high level of welfare for farm animals. Regulations for organic livestock husbandry aim to ensure this. Nonetheless, organic livestock husbandry has been criticised for cases of poor animal welfare. The regulations themselves cannot guarantee the animals’ health and welfare. What counts, is how the regulations are applied and how farmers in general treat their animals. The dissemination of know-how aimed at the challenges inherent in organic farming methods are important in order to secure a high level of animal health and welfare. There is a need for a tool that evaluates, secures and possibly improves animal welfare on organic farms.

To meet the need for information and expertise, an advisory tool on animal health and welfare is developed by the Norwegian Centre for Ecological Agriculture (NORSØK, Bioforsk Organic Food and Farming Division from Jan 2006), together with the Norwegian School of Veterinary Science (NVH), TINE’s producer advisory service and organic dairy farmers. The advisory tool is called “Organic Cow Comfort”. The Norwegian Cattle Health Service wants to implement the advisory tool into their advisory service within January 2007, and the aim is to offer an advisory service in animal welfare for all dairy farmers in Norway.

ORGANIC COW COMFORT

The advisory service includes a farm visit by a veterinarian and an advisor. This visit is done during the winter period where the animals are kept mostly indoors. During the visit they evaluate herd health and welfare and give advice on disease prevention and the improvement of animal welfare. The evaluation of herd health and welfare is done with the help of checklists where the following parameters are recorded: General impression of the herd, animal behaviour, interaction between animals and humans, and farm management and operating systems. A report is prepared with a health and welfare plan where specific measures for improvement of animal welfare are outlined. This plan is followed up at a second visit during summer period. At this visit the pasture, access to water, shelter etc. is evaluated. The advisory service does also include counselling meetings with groups of farmers. The checklists are very much based on checklists used in a welfare assessment system tested in Denmark (Rousing, 2003).

1) General impression of the herd

Animal health (or lack thereof) is considered to be an important welfare indicator. We use data from The Norwegian Cattle Health Recording System in addition to a visual assessment during the farm visits. Such aspects as fatness, cleanliness, excrements, respiratory problems and various types of injuries are recorded. The Norwegian Cattle Health Service has had a complete health card recording system since 1976, where the information is regularly sent to a main frame at a central database in Oslo, combined with other production data from the same herd (The Norwegian Dairy Herd Recording System). Every disease and treatment, whether by the vet or by the farmer, must be recorded. We do also use information from The Norwegian Dairy Herd
Recording System that is recording information about milking yield, fodder, breed etc.

2) Animal behaviour
Normal and abnormal behaviour are recorded during the farm visits:
Milking is a daily, routine operation. Thus, it is important that milking routines are not a source of stress for the cows. The advisors evaluates the cow's behaviour during milking by looking at leg stamping, kicking, tail switching and attempts to remove the milking machine. Reasons for such behaviour include social stress associated with loose housing or while waiting outdoors to be milked, discomfort during milking or fear of the stockman.

Rising is a frequent behaviour in dairy cows. If the cows are prevented from rising, or have any difficulties in carrying out this activity, this may indicate that rising causes discomfort or may lead to injuries. We use the same scoring system as used in the "Bristol Welfare Assurance Programme" (University of Bristol, 2004).

Stall standing –Index (Cook, 2002) is measured to evaluate the quality of the cubicles or problems with lameness. The index is number of animals standing in the cubicles, divided on the total amount of animal in the cubicles, multiplied with one hundred. The number should be under 15 %.

Stereotypic behaviour may indicate environmental stress and that the animal is, or has been frustrated and not in command of the situation. Stereotypes are registered at the farm visit, but are difficult to see and evaluate on just one or two visits. Well-being indicated by playfulness, i.e., jumping, kicking and nudging other calves is also noted, and specially the calves behaviour after milk feeding is measured. The advisors give information to the farmer about stereotypic behaviour such as tongue-rolling and leaning in cows, and excessive oral contact with other calves, themselves or housing installations in cows.

3) Interaction between animals and humans
The relationship between herd members and the human(s) feeding, milking and caring for them is of major importance for the animals' behaviour, welfare and performance. If the relationship is characterised by stress, animals will feel discomfort or fear each time they interact with humans. To evaluate the human-animal relationship we are using tests which record the reaction of an animal to a person slowly approaching it in order to attempt to pat the animal.

4) Farm management and operating systems
Information about operating systems and farm management is important in order to find the causes of different types of behaviour and diseases. During the visits, the farmers are asked about their farm operations, the routines of the dairy workers, while we also have access to data from The Norwegian Dairy Herd Recording System and The Norwegian Cattle Health Recording System. Also, data on livestock housing, technical installations and cleaning routines are recorded.

Conclusions
Organic agriculture wishes to emphasise animal welfare, and aims to be at the forefront with regard to promoting the welfare of farm animals. It is therefore important to increase the expertise in the field of animal welfare in organic farming systems among veterinarians, advisers and farmers. An advisory service that includes on-farm assessment of animal welfare will contribute to securing a high level of animal welfare in organic production. The advisory tool described here focuses on organic dairy farming. However, it is conceivable that this concept can be adapted to other organic and conventional livestock production systems.

The focus on advice, not only control, is important in order to create a positive dialog between farmer, advisor and veterinarian, and hereby increased knowledge on organic farming and improve animal welfare.

References


University of Bristol (2004). www.vetschool.bris.ac.uk/animalwelfare