

Better-Calf: Dairy calf systems for resilience, welfare and sustainability in rural territories

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The agricultural sector in north-west Europe is facing several challenges including: (1) economic (e.g. low farm incomes), (2) environmental (e.g. climate change, ammonia, biodiversity decline), and (3) social (e.g. competition for land between producing 'feed' for animal production and 'food' for human consumption, animal welfare, high quality affordable food). These challenges have contributed to a decrease in the number of family farms (e.g. 51% of retiring farmers have no successor in France, 44% in Wallonia), with small farms particularly vulnerable (e.g. 'small' farms in Ireland are reducing at the rate of 1.5% per year). This has implications for rural resilience and the preservation of cultural landscape and biodiversity. Grass-based beef cattle production systems can help to address these challenges. The low cost of grazed pasture when compared to conserved forage such as corn silage and concentrate feeds create opportunities for profitable production systems. Such grass-based systems also imply low competition between human food and animal feed (since livestock are otherwise fed grains which could instead be fed directly to humans), may increase soil carbon storage and improve water quality while also producing local and high-quality food. There is a particular opportunity for livestock farmers to use dairy calves, specifically those not required as replacements in the dairy herd, and to add value to these calves by growing them to mature weights as beef cattle. Presently these calves are often reared in veal production systems. Given ethical concerns with veal systems there is interest in increasing the proportion of dairy calves that are produced in grass-based beef production systems. There are a very wide range of dairy-calf systems that are operated at farm level. Farmers and other stakeholders are often unclear on which system is preferred. The "Better-Calf" project, funded by Interreg North-West Europe, aims to support rural areas and family farms by providing them with tools to optimise grass-fed dairy calf rearing systems. The project will test and promote the implementation of resilient dairy calf systems. Through the support of local and/or national public bodies we aim to create territorial plans for the development of a dairy calf supply chain with optimised management practices. A survey of north-west European citizens and consumers will set out the expectations for the production of dairy-beef and the evaluation of their willingness to pay for those products. Dairy calf systems will be tested on experimental farms with a focus on maximising access to pasture thereby promoting animal welfare. A network of 40 commercial farms across Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg and Switzerland will be created encompassing a large range of the soil and climatic conditions of north-west Europe. Finally, we will engage with the economic actors in the dairy and beef sectors and public bodies to develop action plans to implement the local production of dairy-beef that maximises returns to all actors and create a more viable sector.