



Research Reports

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Perspectives of Western Canadian dairy farmers on the future of farming

In Canada, as in many other developed countries, the practice of dairy farming is continually evolving. There were approximately 20,000 Canadian dairy farms in 1999 but now, two decades later, this number has declined by 50%, with the number of dairy cows remaining relatively stable. At the same time, we have seen increases in the use of automation on farms, and increased attention on animal welfare.

Questions from the public on how we care for animals have also gained traction over recent years. Much of discussion has focused on the pigs, laying hens and veal calves, but now there is a growing awareness of practices on dairy farms, leading to questions about pain management (e.g. with disbudding), close confinement (e.g. with tie- stalls and tethering of calves), the inability to perform certain natural behaviours (e.g. for cows to graze and calves to nurse from the cow).

When common management practices fail to resonate with societal values, the social license of the industry falls into jeopardy. The Canadian dairy industry has been a leader in addressing these issues, being one of the first countries to develop an industry-led initiative (Dairy Farmers of Canada's proAction Initiative "proAction") in response to some of these challenges. Farmers are more likely to be motivated to follow such standards if policies are aligned with their values and beliefs. Therefore, in a recent study we set out to better understand farmers' perspectives on standards of animal care on Canadian dairy farms, with a focus on the role of policies such as those related to proAction.

Our study focused on producers in Western Canada. We conducted seven focus groups. These began with each participant writing down key words that represented the "must-haves" on dairy farms in 20 years from now – the idea was to give farmers a chance to articulate their vision for the future of the industry. We encouraged participants to focus on aspects related to animal care, but all answers were accepted. We summarized the ideas identified by the participants (Figure 1 below) and used these to inform a discussion and elicit ideas on how to achieve these 'must-haves'.

We found that the most frequently mentioned 'must-haves' included cow comfort, good employee management, good cow-health management, and advanced technologies. Participants also related good animal care on dairy farms to good working conditions for employees and profitability. Having public trust in the dairy industry was viewed as an important 'must-have', and participants believed that one of the main benefits of mandatory policies for animal care was the potential to increase trust. Thus, producers tended to support the development of animal care policies and saw these as increasing the legitimacy of the industry.

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