

How dairy science students view the future of cow care

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Public expectations of agriculture are sometimes in conflict with common management practices on farms, threatening social license and the long-term social and economic sustainability of the industry. Today's students will be tomorrow's leaders, so these individuals will likely have a key role to play in bridging any disconnect between industry practices and public values.

How these future leaders view industry practices, and the role of public voices in shaping these practices, is likely to have important impact on future policy and practices in the dairy industry. Some research has been done on the views of producers and other industry stakeholders, but very little is known about the views and perspectives of prospective agricultural professionals. A recently published UBC study¹ aimed to address this gap, focusing on the views of undergraduate students pursuing programs in dairy and animal science.

We conducted 6 "focus group" sessions, each once bringing together a group of 7 to 8 students (all taking part in the 2019 cohort of the US Dairy Education and Training Consortium in Clovis, New Mexico). The Consortium is a multi-university organization that aims to meet the educational and training needs of the rapidly expanding dairy industry in the US. All students enrolled in the 2019 Consortium voluntarily participated. During the focus groups, students were asked to describe what they considered to be the "must haves" for the future of animal care in the dairy industry in 20 years from now, and how these "must haves" might be aligned with public expectations.



Figure 1. A word cloud illustrating the most commonly used words when undergraduate animal and dairy science students were asked about the most important "must haves" for dairy farms in 20 years. The larger the font, the more frequently the word was mentioned. From Ritter et al. (2021).

Students raised issues related to technology and automation, group housing of calves, provision of adequate facilities (including enrichment), and addressing environmental concerns, as "must haves" for

future dairy farming in 20 years (Figure 1). The role of the public in influencing industry practices was also discussed. For instance, students voiced concerns over bad publicity over controversial topics, but also recognized some changes expected by the public may not always be feasible on farms (e.g., prolonged cow-calf contact).

Some students also expressed uncertainty about what values the public held and the best way to align public and industry values. They suggested that greater transparency on farms, including the use of education and outreach programs as well as financial incentives to promote key changes to contentious practices, could be ways to earn public trust and for better aligning public expectations with the dairy industry.

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