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**FVE draft position on
Welfare of Dairy Cows: Lameness**

**DRAFT FOR MEMBER CONSULTATION
DEADLINE 31 March 2019
(comments to nancy@fve.org)**

FVE position

- Lameness is one of the most pressing welfare problems for dairy cows, as well as a significant economic problem.
- Lameness is multifactorial, with links including farming system, management processes and genetic selection.
- Within its dual animal welfare responsibility - to advocate for the best interests of animals under the care of individual veterinarians, as well as to advocate for solutions to address the root causes of animal welfare problems – the veterinary profession must proactively address cattle lameness at the levels of individual veterinary professionals, veterinary organisations and international veterinarians.
- FVE has identified five actions that must be taken at each of these levels to reduce cattle lameness, including: pairing veterinarians with farm management; providing herd health advice using participatory methods; increasing the frequency of foot trimming; lobbying governments to enforce legislation covering dairy cow welfare; advocating for a transition in housing systems to reduce lameness; and engaging assurance schemes and retailers to include lameness reduction targets in their standards. FVE will lobby and assist breeding companies to further increase selection for health and fitness traits; initiating co-ordinated lameness prevention and monitoring programmes; calling for further research and funding.
- FVE calls for repeated assessment of dairy cow welfare at European level, including lameness, noting that the comprehensive European Food Safety Authority 2009 scientific report and opinions are nearly 10 years old.
- FVE calls for an EU Directive on Dairy Cow Welfare to achieve minimum standards for dairy cows across Europe, similar to the species-specific EU legislation protecting poultry and pigs.

44 **Introduction**

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46 There are 23.5 million dairy cows in the European Union (EU), producing 168
47 million tonnes of milk a year. Milk is the EU's most valuable agricultural sector,
48 providing approximately 15 per cent of agricultural output. The number of dairy
49 cows has decreased steadily during the last 30 years, while the yearly milk
50 production per cow has steadily increased¹.

51

52 Several studies and reports ^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7} have identified risks to dairy cow welfare
53 and there is consensus on the most frequent welfare problems¹. These include:

54

- 55 • Lameness
- 56 • Mastitis
- 57 • Reproductive problems
- 58 • Metabolic disease
- 59 • Infectious disease
- 60 • Longevity

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62 This position is concerned with lameness in dairy cows.

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65 **The problem**

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67 Lameness is widely regarded as one of the most pressing welfare problems for dairy
68 cows^{1, 6, 9} on account of the numbers of animals affected, the duration for which
69 they are affected and the severity of welfare impacts on individual affected animals.

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71 The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has reported that the majority of
72 estimates for lameness prevalence are within the range 20-25%⁸. A prevalence of
73 lameness of up to 5% is achievable on commercial farms; when the prevalence of
74 recognisable lameness in dairy cattle is above 10%, this indicates that the
75 prevention programme is inadequate⁵.

76

77 Most lameness in dairy cattle is caused by lesions in the foot^{5,6}. Several different
78 conditions can give rise to lameness, including non-infectious conditions such as
79 sole ulcer and white line disease and also infectious causes such as digital dermatitis
80 and digital phlegmon. Modern dairy production has seen a decrease in non-
81 infectious causes and an increase in infectious causes, particularly digital
82 dermatitis.

83

84 Lameness causes considerable pain to affected cows because lameness-causing
85 lesions are painful⁸. Lame cows are also more likely to experience reduced welfare
86 because they may become subordinate, lose body condition and are more prone to
87 reduced fertility and to develop mastitis and metabolic disease^{5,6}.

88

89 Lameness is also a significant economic problem, increasing veterinary costs and
90 reducing milk yield. Lame cows produce between 300 and 600 fewer litres of milk
91 per lactation^{10,11} and take 20 to 40 days longer to get back in calf^{12,14}. The estimated
92 cost of clinical lameness in dairy cattle approaches 450 to 500 € per case¹³.

93

94

95 **Legislation**

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97 There is no species-specific EU Directive on the welfare of dairy cows. Dairy cow
98 welfare is covered by two connected pieces of legislation - Council Directive 98/58
99 and the Recommendation concerning cattle adopted by the Standing Committee of
100 the European Convention for the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes.
101 The European Commission points out that the EU has ratified the European
102 Convention, so the Recommendation concerning cattle “is legally binding to the
103 Member States. The provisions laid down in the recommendation shall thus be
104 applied on dairy holdings within the EU.”

105

106 Article 3 of Council Directive 98/58 requires Member States to “make provision to
107 ensure that the owners or keepers take all reasonable steps to ensure the welfare of
108 animals under their care and to ensure that those animals are not caused any
109 unnecessary pain, suffering or injury”.

110

111 In May 2015 the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) adopted standards
112 on the welfare of dairy cows¹⁵. These are not binding but as with the Council of
113 Europe Recommendation, farmers who have not adhered to the OIE standards may
114 not be able to demonstrate that they have taken “all reasonable steps” to ensure their
115 cows’ welfare. All EU Member States are members of the OIE.

116

117 The Netherlands and Great Britain set a maximum permitted level of lameness as a
118 statutory guideline, where inspectors intervene when >5% of cows are lame
119 (Netherlands) or 5% at locomotor score 3 (Great Britain)¹⁶.

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121

122 **Risks for lameness**

123

124 EFSA⁵ identify farming system, management processes and genetic selection as
125 key risks for lameness in dairy cows.

126

127 • *Farming system*

128

129 Risks are much greater in systems using cubicle housing or tie-stalls than in straw
130 yards or at pasture⁵. The most important hazard in relation to housing is the lack of
131 space in tie-stalls. Dairy cattle are reluctant to be tied, both initially and after a
132 period of exercise and tied cattle have more lameness than those free to move with
133 good flooring and resting facilities. Dairy cattle are motivated to walk
134 independently of the need to feed or drink⁵.

135 In cubicles the most important risks are associated with inadequate flooring in the
136 walking area, poor cubicle design and inadequate bedding⁵.

137

138 • *Management processes*

139

140 The most important management risks are those related to inadequate care and
141 monitoring of foot health and hygiene, which are similar across all housing systems
142 considered. Weekly attention to foot hygiene leads to a reduction in infectious
143 conditions of the foot⁵.

144

145 There should be systems for monitoring the prevalence and severity of lameness by
146 scoring locomotion and foot lesions every 3 to 6 months in all dairy herds. Foot
147 inspection with trimming as necessary should be carried out at intervals not greater
148 than 6 months⁵ by a veterinarian or skilled foot trimmer, as part of an active and
149 regularly reviewed veterinary herd health plan. Therefore it is necessary to organise
150 appropriate training programmes for both, with standardisation of procedures and
151 methods. Quality, which can also help engender pride in work being undertaken,
152 must be assured by a process of licensing foot trimmers by an official body.

153

154 • ***Genetic selection***

155

156 Genetic selection for high milk yield with insufficient emphasis on other traits
157 relating to fitness increases the risk of lameness and associated pain and poor
158 welfare⁵. EFSA describes long term genetic selection for high milk yield as the
159 major factor causing poor welfare, in particular health problems, in dairy cows⁶.

160

161

162 **Veterinary roles and responsibilities in animal welfare**

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164 The veterinary profession has responsibility to advocate for animals' best interests
165 at the **individual** level (e.g. veterinary professionals having direct contact with
166 animal keepers and owners), **community** level (e.g. veterinary practices offering
167 animal welfare expertise through local media, to local politicians, and other
168 outreach activities), **national** level (e.g. veterinary associations formulating and
169 advocating animal welfare policies) and **international** level (through policy
170 formulation and advocacy, and effective partnerships between national and
171 international veterinary associations, and other international bodies and
172 institutions).

173

174 Overall, the veterinary profession has a dual responsibility - to advocate for the best
175 interests of animals under the care of individual veterinarians (at individual level),
176 as well as to advocate for changes and solutions to address the root causes of animal
177 welfare problems (especially at community, national and international levels).

178

179 FVE recognises that cattle lameness is multifactorial in origin and gives an example
180 of how an animal welfare problem should be addressed by individual veterinary
181 professionals, veterinary practices and veterinary associations. FVE calls for
182 lameness in dairy cows to be addressed at each of these levels, e.g.:

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184 ■ ***Individual (veterinary practitioners):***

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186 - To identify, diagnose and treat lame cows, and communicate the cow welfare
187 impacts to farmers

188 - To recognise pain in lame cows, and routinely use analgesia during and after the
189 treatment of painful lameness-causing lesions

190 - To implement lameness prevention programmes

191 - To implement on-farm mobility scoring as part of active herd-health planning;
192 collate results for on-farm trend-monitoring and between-farm benchmarking;
193 and provide training and support in mobility scoring to stockpeople

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▪ ***Community (veterinary practices):***

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To have co-ordinated lameness prevention and monitoring programmes, ensuring routine, consistent on-farm lameness assessment and data-gathering

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To organise or attend regional farmer discussion groups to focus on lameness, with facilitated discussions to share good management practices and between-farm benchmarking data

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203 -

To share good management practices and provide knowledge transfer on cattle lameness to farming communities, through veterinary practice communication channels, e.g. practice newsletter, social media and press releases to local farming press

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207 -

To support and collaborate with relevant allied professionals, e.g. foot trimmers, on regional lameness prevention programmes

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▪ ***National (veterinary associations):***

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212 -

To initiate and participate in industry-wide cattle lameness strategies, alongside other key stakeholders

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214 -

To lobby national governments to detail how they will interpret and enforce the European Directive and Recommendation; for example, by setting a maximum permitted prevalence of lameness in a herd

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217 -

To advocate for a transition in housing systems, away from tie-stalls and recognising the benefits of straw yards and/or pasture access; where cubicles are used, to advocate for improvements to cubicle house design that meet the cows' physical and behavioural needs

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221 -

To encourage assurance schemes and retailers to include lameness-reduction targets in their requirements, with provision of linked farm support

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223 -

To lobby and assist breeding companies to further increase selection for health and fitness traits, to improve cow welfare, with a corresponding decrease in selection pressure for milk yield and productivity where necessary. Breeding objectives should include resistance to lameness, mastitis and other diseases

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228 -

To support and collaborate with relevant allied professional bodies on lameness prevention strategies, e.g. foot trimmer associations

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230 -

To call for further research and funding for automated systems for monitoring cow locomotion and the prevalence and severity of lameness

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232 -

To advocate for societal-level funding support for improved dairy cow health and welfare, for example –

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✓ by signposting citizens to assurance schemes (where available) that improve farm animal health and welfare

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✓ by lobbying governments to recognise farm animal health and welfare as a public good to be allocated public funding support

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- *International*

- FVE welcomes ongoing focus by European institutions on the welfare of dairy cows, such as the 2017 DG Health and Food Safety Overview Report on the Welfare of Cattle on Dairy Farms¹, and calls for further action by European institutions to ensure implementation and monitoring of recommendations by Member States
- FVE calls for repeated assessment of dairy cow welfare at European level, including lameness, noting that the comprehensive European Food Safety Authority 2009 scientific report and opinions are nearly 10 years old
- FVE calls for an EU Directive on Dairy Cow Welfare to achieve minimum standards for dairy cows across Europe, similar to the species-specific EU legislation protecting poultry and pigs

Participatory approaches

A barrier to addressing lameness is that some farmers may underestimate the problem, for example by underestimating the lameness prevalence in their herd¹⁷. Simply informing farmers about lameness prevalence within their herd and providing external advice is rarely effective⁷. Uptake and implementation of veterinary advice by farmers can be increased if a facilitated, participatory approach is taken rather than a traditional advisory style. This approach can be valuable when **veterinarians are co-creating herd health plans with farm staff, which are tailored to a specific farm and should actively encourage a process of continuous improvement**. Many farmers value discussion groups as fora for knowledge transfer and to benchmark their progress¹. Farmers and stockpeople are more likely to change their behaviour if they know others have done the same.

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