IDENTIFICATION AND VALUATION OF THE MAIN FACTORS AFFECTING THE WELFARE OF DAIRY CATTLE IN URUGUAY

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Objectives: Knowing the health problems affecting animals due to technological advances, the intensification in production and the daily increase in the demands regarding quantity and quality of the milk produced, it is of interest to identify the parameters to evaluate the condition of our dairy cattle regarding ANIMAL WELFARE.

Various animal parameters were evaluated (physical ailments, behavior, relationship with the environment, cortisol levels), as well as the environmental conditions, the facilities, the roads and the handling of the animals.

The objective of the work was to describe ANIMAL WELFARE in dairy farms in the Milk Production Region in Uruguay and to devise an ANIMAL WELFARE evaluation system by measuring the various animal parameters and their environment.

Methodology: We visited 15 dairy farms in Uruguay between October 2007 and March 2008. The information was collected using survey-like forms which were specially designed, and the data was presented in a descriptive way.

The information was analyzed using electronic spreadsheets with numeric categorical variables.

Results: Within a sample of 1007 animals, 74.58% showed an acceptable physical condition, 6% showed a slight limp and 0.6% a severe limp. Out of a total of 2527 nipples valued, the prevailing characteristics were normal skin (63.99%), smooth sphincter (76.53%) and thickened nipple base (15.39%). When evaluating the milking rooms in all the farms visited, 46.67% were in good conditions, 46.67% in regular condition and 6.67% in bad condition; 93.33% had right angles, steps or slopes, although it was observed that in 73.33% of the cases the animal flow was good. The roads covered by the cows towards the milking room were good only in 33.33% of the cases and the average distance covered per day was of 4.5 km. 80% of the farms provided an average supplementary ration of 2.18 kg during milking.

The plasma cortisol levels in the control group and the problem group were compared (foot pathologies), the second group showing higher values.

Conclusions: Within the sample analyzed, both animal health and welfare are satisfactory. Likewise, the handling of the animals is satisfactory. However, the environment of the animals had deficiencies that might affect their welfare.

This work made it possible to create an ANIMAL WELFARE valuation system based on the various parameters proposed, establishing the foundation for future research on the subject.