Dairy Cows Fact Sheet

In this factsheet...

To keep producing milk for human consumption, a dairy cow must produce a calf each year.

Calves are taken from their mothers within 12-24 hours of birth. The separation breaks a strong maternal bond, and both cows and calves suffer.

Cruel separation

Calves are taken from their mothers within 12-24 hours of birth. If nature was allowed to take its course—calves would suckle from their mother for several months, even up to a year. Mother cows, like most mammals have a strong maternal bond. One study found that this bond was formed in as little as five minutes.[1]

When calves are removed mother cows will frantically bellow for the offspring that they will never see again. Separated calves appear frightened and bewildered. Regardless of how this situation is handled this separation causes enormous stress for both the cow and calf.

New mothers are returned to the milking herd to maximise profits. The milk that nature destined for the calf is then processed for human consumption.

The fate of the calf

Around 1 million unwanted dairy calves, not wanted for herd replacement or rearing for pink veal, are slaughtered each year as 'waste-products' of the dairy industry —usually at around the tender age of 5- 6 days old. Dairy calves are not valued as they don't grow at the same rate as beef calves and their meat quality is considered sub-standard by the beef industry.

As soon as calves reach their fifth day of life (after separation from their mothers they are fed a milk substitute) the industry *code of practice* allows the calves to be transported to abattoirs and saleyards. Bewildered calves are subjected to the stresses of unfamiliar sights and sounds and multiple and often rough handling as they are transported to calf scales, sale yards and slaughterhouses.

While *Codes of Practice*[2] are in place to guide "the humane handling of week old calves", it is difficult to ascertain how strictly this is adhered to as the *code* is unenforceable. Calves sold in the morning may be killed by sunset. However, the Code allows for them to be killed the next day, meaning they can go for 24 hours without a drink, a very long time for a newborn.

With ambiguous wording such as "desirable", "recommended", "appropriate", "should" and "unnecessary suffering", the *Code,* like all other animal welfare *Codes of Practice,* provides

exemptions to industry operators from animal cruelty legislation and allows for an entire gamut of cruelties to be perpetrated on baby farm animals, because these are accepted practices of the industry.

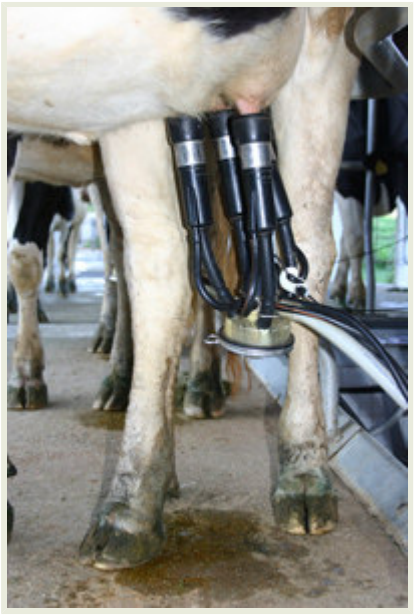
The life of a dairy cow

The strain of producing enormous amounts of milk

The natural lifespan of a cow is up to 20 years, yet few cows live beyond the age of seven years, and many younger animals go to slaughter.

Selective breeding, and more recently genetic manipulation, has resulted in the selection and production of cows which produce enormous amounts of milk. The modern dairy cow can produce about 35-50 litres of milk per day—about ten times more milk than her calf would need

Producing large quantities of milk puts a significant metabolic strain on the animal. The great weight of the udders often causes painful stretching or tearing of ligaments and frequently causes foot problems, such as laminitis. These foot problems can be associated with significant pain. Dairy cattle are also susceptible to infections of the teat and udder (mastitis) - this can be very painful.



The milking machine itself may render the cow more susceptible to infection. The front teats may be subjected to vacuum pulsing for up to two minutes after the quarter has been emptied and while the hind teats are still yielding. This is believed to be painful for the cow, and may also weaken tissue. The nature of the vacuum milking process is known to increase the possibility of infection.

Frustrated Maternal Instincts

A young female (heifer) has her first calf at two years of age. The calf is taken away, usually within 12-24 hours of birth, and the mother is milked to capacity. She is ready to conceive again about three weeks later, and every three weeks after that. She is put 'in calf' again at her second or third heat, and milking continues for some 10 months after she has given birth. She is rested for several weeks before the next calf arrives, then the cycle continues for as long as she can continue to produce enough milk to be a "profitable unit".

It is clear that separating a calf from its mother causes significant distress and suffering to both animals.

Induced calving

This is a 'herd management practice' used to induce the cows in the herd to calve in a short period of time—regardless of when they were mated and conceived. It requires the injection of corticosterioids by a veterinarian to prematurely trigger the birth of the calf and thereby allowing the cow to re-enter the 'milking' herd at an earlier time.

The welfare of the mother cow is often compromised (particularly if greater than 3 weeks of expected gestation) as the procedure increases the risk of mastitis, metabolic diseases, retained membranes and infection. The welfare of the prematurely born calf is also of concern as the calf may be weak, requiring special care and attention. In some cases calves should be immediately killed on farm (an few farmers wish to undertake this task, and may not be skilled). A

veterinarian rarely attends the birth to monitor the health of cow and calf. A 2005 national survey showed that the routine use of induction in seasonal dairy herds is declining but no industry figures are made available to be able to determine how wide-spread the use of this concerning practice currently is.

The docking of cows tails

In some 'dairy' regions, such as Gippsland in Victoria, the 'docking' (surgical amputation or using elastic rings) of a cows tail is quite common—sometimes only a small part of the tail is left intact. It is done because dairy farmers don't like to be swished in the face with a dirty tail whilst in the milking shed, and a mistaken belief that dirty tails contribute to higher bacterial contamination and perhaps higher levels of mastitis. New shed designs and research have made both reasons redundant—yet the practice still continues. A 2005 national survey found that 20% of dairy farmers routinely dock cows tails, but that the practice is declining.

Without a tail the cows are inevitably irritated by flies that they are unable to dislodge. The amputation causes immediate pain and the nerve damage to the stump may result in chronic pain. The practice is prohibited in some states, and the Model Code of Practice for cattle indicates it should only be done 'for udder health' (already discredited by research) or on a veterinarian's advice. It is likely that where a farmer does it 'routinely', that no veterinary advice is sought, nor pain relief used.

Dehorning of cows, disbudding of calves

Dairy breeds of cattle will usually grow horns and in the jostling involved during the herding process for twice a day milking, they may injure other cows. Therefore, heifer (female) calves being raised to enter the milking herd will usually undergo 'disbudding' at an early age (less than 6 months of age). This is usually done by applying heat cauterization to the horn buds, or by using a knife or scoop tool to remove all the horn growth tissues in the horn bud. Currently this painful procedure is done without analgesia or sedation (though pain relief regimes have been developed for this procedure).

If dairy calves are not 'disbudded', older dairy cattle may be 'dehorned'—a painful and distressing procedure that also carries a higher risk of infection and even blowfly infestation in some regions. The Code of Practice recommends dehorning without analgesia should not occur in cattle over 6 months of age—but this routinely occurs (in the beef industry and to some extent in the dairy industry). Researchers have shown that dehorning adult cattle has 'severe adverse effects on welfare'. Pain relief is not routinely used because it would add to costs and time to conduct the procedure.

Statistics

As with other farm-based businesses the industry has grown dramatically over the past few decades while the number of farms halved from 22,000 in 1980 to 11,000 in 2003; the average herd size has increased from small family farms with an average of 85 cows in 1980 to approximately195 cows/herd in 2002/3. The national dairy herd of 2 million cows pumped out around 10,000 million litres of milk last year. The major concentration of dairy farms is in Victoria, accounting for around 63.9% of this country's dairy production. No other state comes near this amount of production: NSW accounts for 12.6%, Queensland 6.7%, WA 4% and Tasmania 5.9%.

Conclusion—the ethics of the dairy industry

As with every other animal industry, it is in the interests of the dairy industry for their customers not to know the reality of the industry. They are keenly aware that many milk drinkers—especially women—would be appalled by an industry that deliberately gets a female pregnant, allows her to give birth and greet her newborn, only then to remove her young—and in most cases send her calf to be slaughtered before they have even experienced a week of life.

References

[1] Frances C. Flower and Daniel M. Weary, “Effects of Early Separation on the Dairy Cow and Calf: 2. Separation at 1 Day and 2 Weeks After Birth,” *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 70 (2001): 275-284.
[2] Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals—Cattle 2nd Edition, and variations adopted in each State, and similar codes for saleyards and transport.

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