Healthy herds

Researchers are benchmarking the health and welfare of Ontario’s organic and conventional dairy farms

Tiestall or freestall, pasture-based or not, your approach to managing your herd’s welfare differs from other farms. Whether you are an organic or conventional producer, you know healthy, comfortable cows produce high-quality milk. A new University of Guelph study could help you identify key practices affecting your herd’s welfare and develop better on-farm practices.

There is little information on cow health and welfare in the organic sector, despite the fact organic milk production has doubled between 2005 and 2010. Professor Trevor DeVries, department of animal and poultry science, Kemptville Campus, and his research team, conducted a study to benchmark cow health and welfare on organic and conventional farms. They assessed lactating cows under different housing and management practices. Benchmarking lets you compare certain aspects of your farm operation to others in the same industry. This comparison could help you detect limitations in your herd’s health and management to make improvements.

DeVries and his team surveyed 59 Southwestern Ontario dairy herds over a one-year period. The herds comprised 18 organic farms, 12 conventional farms with pasture use and 29 conventional farms without pasture use. Hock lesions, cleanliness, lameness and body condition were evaluated during the spring and fall. Body condition is an indirect measure of a cow’s energy balance. The researchers also recorded all clinical mastitis incidents.

There was no significant difference in the clinical mastitis incidence rate between the organic and conventional herds. The researchers discovered lactating dairy cows had better body condition during the spring than in the fall. Cows from conventional farms had higher body condition scores and were cleaner than those from organic farms. Freestall cows had poorer hygiene than those in tiestalls. In addition, hock lesions were higher for tiestall cows in the spring than in the fall.

“This work will help the dairy industry identify key practices influencing cow welfare across a variety of management systems, and aid in the development of improved on-farm practices,” said DeVries.

He and his team want to examine how housing and management factors affect the herd’s mastitis incidence rates, as well as other cow-based measures of health and welfare.

For more information about this project, visit the Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada website at http://oacc.info/.

Katharine Tuerke is a student writer with the University of Guelph’s office of research. Collaborators include professors Renée Bergeron, Alfred Campus, and Ken Leslie, as well as Herman Barkema, University of Calgary and Alan Fredeen, Dalhousie University. Funding is provided by the Organic Science Cluster, a part of the Canadian Agri-Science Clusters Initiative of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada’s Growing Forward Policy Framework.