

Working Towards a More Socially Sustainable Dairy Industry¹

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■ Take Home Messages

- The available evidence suggests that attempts to reduce transparency about farm practices will erode public trust in farming.
- Industry-led efforts to educate the public about farming practices are not an effective method of changing public attitudes about farming.
- A sustained process of respectful engagement between individuals working in agriculture and the general public can help improve dialogue and better identify areas of shared values and where there are important disconnects between public values and current practices.
- Members of the dairy industry need to better identify and articulate a core set of shared values and develop a vision for how practices on farm can better align with these values

■ Introduction

Animal welfare is an important social concern. To better retail social licence, those not directly involved in farming, including the general public and other supply chain interests, must be accepted as credible stakeholders in the discussions on the way farm animals are cared for. In our presentation we will discuss different ways the industry has responded to increasing societal interest and concern, including attempts to shield practices from public view (e.g., via so called “Ag-gag” laws), attempts by the industry to ‘educate’ the public, and more rarely, sustained attempts to engage respectful two-way discussions with the public. We end our paper with a call for the dairy industry to take leadership over this process, by clearly articulating our shared values and a long-term vision for the industry that ensures that these values are reflected in our practices.

■ Closing the Barn Doors

A natural response to criticism is to simply close the door in the hope that reducing the supply in information will help prevent further criticism from taking place. The idea is simply that if people cannot see the practices, then there will be nothing to criticize. This approach may work in the short term but is unlikely to be effective in the longer term. Indeed, efforts to reduce transparency can harm the reputation of agriculture. For example, ‘Ag-gag’ laws attempt to prevent the filming and distribution of undercover videos. We undertook a study where we experimentally assessed the views of U.S. participants that were told about these laws (Robbins et al. 2016).

¹This summary of some of our work is based on two papers: 1) M.A.G. von Keyserlingk and D.M. Weary 2016. Stakeholder views, including the public, on expectations for dairy cattle welfare presented at the Western Canadian Dairy Seminar in 2016 and a peer reviewed paper by D.M. Weary and M.A.G. von Keyserlingk. 2017. Public concerns about dairy-cow welfare: how should the industry respond? *Animal Production Science* 57, 1201–1209 2018.

Our findings indicated that when people were made aware of Ag-gag laws they were less likely to see farmers as trustworthy sources of information (Figure 1), were more likely to support the introduction of new animal welfare laws, and were more likely to believe that the welfare of the animals on farms was poor.

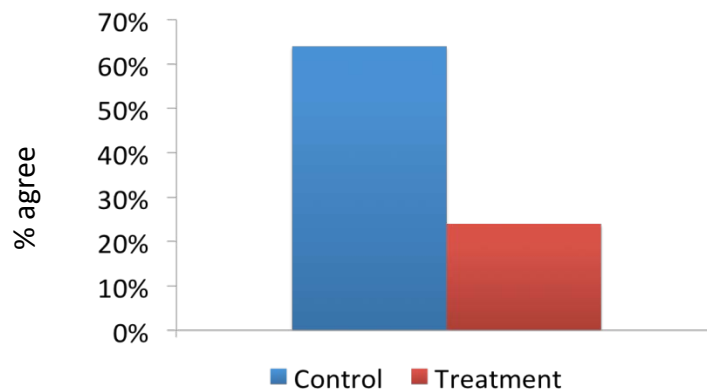


Figure 1. Participants exposed to information about ‘Ag-gag’ laws were less likely to agree that farmers are trustworthy sources of information (adapted from Robbins et al., 2016.)

▪ Educating the Public

People within the livestock industries sometimes feel that the public is ignorant of farming practices, and greater acceptance of current practices could be achieved if there was a concerted effort to better educate the public about farming. Although it may be true that knowledge about agricultural practices is often low, there are several reasons to believe that efforts to educate the public are unlikely to improve acceptance of current practices.

In 2014, shortly after the release of an undercover video showed footage of disturbing animal handling on a dairy farm in British Columbia, Canada, we undertook a study where we tested the hypothesis that education would result in an increased confidence that dairy cattle indeed have a good life on Canadian farms (Ventura et al., 2016). We examined the views of individuals participating in a ‘slow-food’ tour; these individuals were interested in where their food came from, but had little previous exposure to dairy. The 50 individuals all agreed to answer five basic questions about dairy farming before the tour and then asked the same questions after they toured a working dairy farm. On average, participants were able to correctly answer three out of five questions before the tour, and this increased to four out of five after the tour, showing that they learned something on the tour. Visiting the dairy farm seemed to address some of the concerns; after the tour most participants were satisfied that cows were provided adequate access to food and water and that they were handled appropriately. However, most participants left the farm with more concerns than when they started (Figure 2), and on average the perception that cows on the farm led a reasonably good life was reduced after the tour. Thus, when visitors learned more about dairy farming, they came away with more concerns, including, for example, lack of pasture access and early separation of cow and calf. This work, along with other research, highlights the lack of relationship between attitudes and knowledge (Hansen et al. 2003). People’s views are highly related to their values, and these values are not easily shifted.

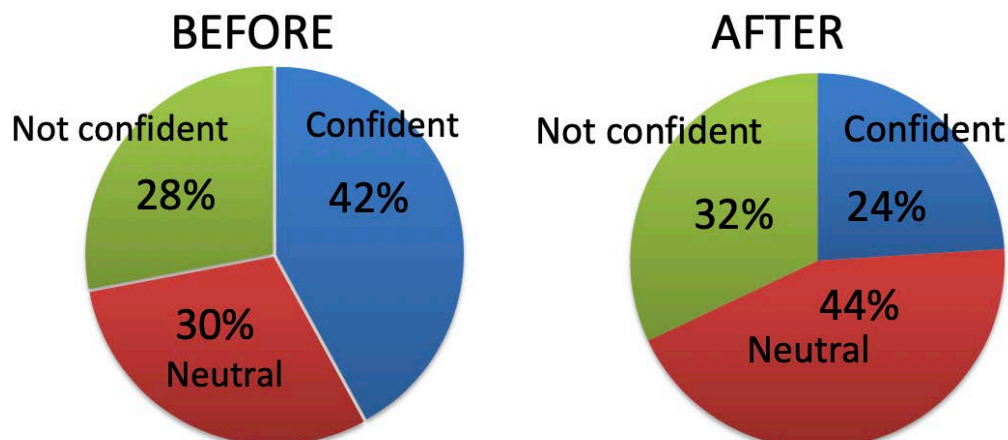


Figure 2. Participants were asked how confident they were that dairy cattle have a reasonably good life before (BEFORE) going on a self-guided tour of the UBC Dairy Education and Research Centre farm. Following the tour of the farm they were asked again (AFTER) how confident they were that dairy cattle have a reasonably good life. (adapted from Ventura et al., 2016)

Education efforts should also consider the ratio of naïve consumers and citizens to decision-makers within the supply chain. As Aerts (2013) argued “it is easier [for citizen advocacy groups] to convince five (or fifteen) buying directors than five (or twenty-five) million consumers.” Corporations can be major buyers of dairy and can require that suppliers meet their specific animal welfare standards. Thus, industry engagement efforts must extend beyond direct messaging to the general consumer and include citizens who are most interested in the issues and are likely to influence corporate and government responses.

▪ Engaging the Public

Rather than focusing on one-way efforts to ‘educate’ the public, the dairy industry might instead consider developing methods of facilitating constructive, informed engagement among the stakeholders. We suggest that this approach will likely be more effective in identifying shared values and potential approaches likely to find general appeal.

At the University of British Columbia (UBC) we have been using web-based surveys to provide opportunities for the public to tell us how they envision the dairy industry of the future. In one such survey (Cardoso et al., 2016), U.S. participants were invited to respond to the following open-ended question: What do you consider to be an ideal dairy farm and why are these characteristics important to you? Respondents focused their responses mainly on animal welfare and quality of milk (Figure 3), but also mentioned social, economic and ecological issues. Providing assurances that animals are well treated, developing methods to incorporate pasture access, and assurance of healthy products without relying on antibiotics or hormones may help provide the dairy industry social license to operate.

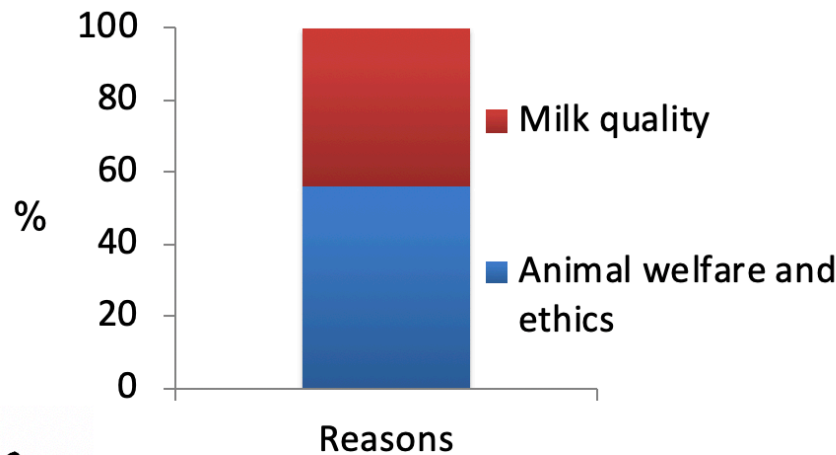


Figure 3. Survey results of 453 U.S. participants who responded to the following open-ended question: What do you consider to be an ideal dairy farm and why are these characteristics important to you? (Cardoso et al., 2016)

Our hope was that by asking the public to tell us how they envision the ideal dairy farm we could begin to identify areas where current practices were out of step and consider methods that better align with public values. This type of approach can provide the industry a basis for predicting which factors are likely to come under increasing criticism and where research efforts should be devoted.

▪ Final Thoughts

Our perspective is that rather than attempting to shield practices from public view or focusing on one-way industry efforts to ‘educate’ the public, we should develop methods of facilitating constructive, informed engagement among the stakeholders. We suggest that this approach will likely to be more effective in identifying shared concerns and potential solutions likely to find general appeal.

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