

A plea for CAP aid to improve the welfare of dairy veal calves

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I. The challenge

Dairy calves, a thorn in the side of milk production

There is a real and painful need to obtain CAP aid for male dairy calves. We are in dialogue with dairy farmers, and their comments confirm our analysis.

The issue of the welfare of veal calves is a major thorn in the side of dairy farming, including organic farming, where the fate of male calves is a source of unease and much debate. There can be no doubt that social condemnation of the current majority situation will increase over the next few years¹ : calves torn away from their mothers, isolated, deprived of the maternal bond for both cow

¹ We quote France de Waal, a prestigious ethologist and primatologist, who writes in *Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Teach Us about Ourselves* (2018) at the end of the 6^{ème} chapter, after talking about the sinister Romanian orphanages described as slaughterhouses of the soul:

"There are many parallels with animals reared in isolation - just think of the appalling practice in the dairy industry of separating calves from their mothers after birth. This leads to profound emotional disturbances in both cows and calves: they are less socially active and competent, and become stressed

and calf, often long transport and intensive fattening in industrial farms, most often on slatted floors, with discomfort, non-physiological feeding, induced anaemia, extreme behavioural, emotional and cognitive deprivation, and essential antibiotic treatments. The idea that the dairy industry is not worth all this distress could spread. It would be far-sighted and responsible, also for reasons of personal ethics, to take the measure of the challenge today and offer dairy farmers the relevant tools to enable them to respond.

Enabling dairy farmers to feel good about themselves

Some farmers tell us that it hurts their hearts to see their calves leave, knowing full well the fate that awaits them, and some keep them and fatten them up when the price of the milk they get, especially from direct sales, gives them room to manoeuvre. We need to develop these kinds of local supply chains.

The CAP gives you the boost you need to reconcile emotional intelligence and economic intelligence.

EFSA recommendations on calf welfare

The European Citizens' Initiative, which gathered 1.4 million signatures to force the European Commission to put an end to the use of cages for all farmed animal species, includes calves, given that current legislation allows them to be kept in individual stalls (similar to a cage) until the age of 8 weeks, at which point they must be housed in 'groups'². The Commission is planning to review all the legislation on the protection of farm animals and has commissioned a large number of reports from EFSA, including one on calves, which was validated in February 2023. This report (finally) reflects the considerable advances made in animal welfare science.

Among its Recommendations is (page 128) (underlined by the author) :

- *The calf should be kept with its mother for a minimum of about 24 hours and then housed with another calf. This would improve on the usual situation where calves are separated from the cow shortly after birth and then housed individually.*
- *Prolonged contact between cow and calf should be applied more and more because of the welfare benefits for both calf and cow. In future, calves should have contact with the mother throughout the period before weaning.*
- *The second best alternative to mother-calf contact is prolonged contact with a nurse cow.*
- *More research is needed to better understand how to implement cow-calf contact (CCC) on a larger scale and to identify the best options in practice. Research is also needed to define best practice for cow-calf rearing.*

much more quickly than other animals that have been allowed to stay with their mothers. They can misjudge situations and quickly become unbalanced. We know far too little about these phenomena, partly because animal emotions were taboo in research for so long, and partly because animals have a reputation for being instinct-driven creatures who give in to every impulse and have no emotional control. Yet for cows, bonobos and many other species, their emotional intelligence is absolutely crucial. It's not at all as if they were a boat without a driver floating down the river of emotions - they are equipped with oars and a rudder to help them navigate. If we let them grow up without love and attachment, we take these instruments away from them, and that's why it's so difficult for orphaned children to achieve emotional balance." *(retranslated from French to English)*

² Depending on the live weight, the minimum compulsory surface area varies from 1.5m² (up to 150kg live weight), 1.7m² (<220kg) and 1.8m² (> 220kg).

Growing awareness, innovations that deserve support

Farmers themselves are experimenting with alternatives³, which are often still inadequate.

First of all, it must be stressed that keeping the calf with its mother for a limited period, say 3 weeks, is in no way the answer to the problem. Admittedly, the calf is in much better condition and, logically, fetches a better selling price than when it is separated from its mother from day one. This economic advantage reflects, once again, the extent to which prevailing practices cause distress and even nutritional deficiency. But when a calf is separated when it is just a few weeks old, the sadness and despair of the separation is terrible, both for the calf - whose weight gain and health are affected - and for the mother. The calf is still a long way from weaning age.

Natural weaning begins at around 8 months at the earliest. It is very gradual and ends with the birth of the next calf, although the special contact between mother and calf from the previous year continues after that. Especially with young females, the bond can last for years, or even a lifetime. Bonds with age group mates become very important.

The distress of dairy calves at weaning is linked to two distinct factors: on the one hand, separation from their mother, which is a source of mental distress since the mother provides them with care and affection - in the wild, her presence and protection are essential to their survival - and, on the other, the change in diet with the loss of maternal milk and its digestive consequences and impact on growth, as well as the loss of suckling, which is a major behavioural need, the deprivation of which results in attempts to suckle other calves. As for social distress, integration into a stable group of young calves is an essential palliative.

The fact remains that for reasons of milk yield, in the current context (which could change!) the painful question of weaning arises: at what age, and using what method?

Work and research on this subject has expanded considerably in recent years⁴. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that society's view of dairy farming is increasingly attentive to and

³ Our cows and us. 2 films by Biolait

⁴ It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a summary of the work on this subject. But here are a few ideas:

First of all, we need to be aware that there are two cases in point which should not be confused:

- rearing calves, particularly replacement heifers. But they can also be animals destined for large beef cattle (heifers, bullocks, steers). The economic approach is to wean them off liquid feed and give them as much solid feed as possible as soon as possible.
- veal calves, which will never reach adulthood in any case, and for which the insistence on so-called white meat (anaemia) may lead to solid feed being reduced to the legal minimum. However, delivery to the catering trade means producing heavier calves, for whom colour is of no importance, and for whom the only thing that matters is feeding them the cheapest possible feed, which means more solid than liquid.

A dairy farm will therefore behave differently towards its future dairy cows than towards calves intended for slaughter, most of which leave the farm of birth at around 15 days old to be transported to an intensive fattening facility. But their welfare needs are the same.

Here is an overview of the different approaches to meeting the needs of calves:

One solution that seems to be developing, especially in organic farming, is to leave the calves with nurse cows. These cows are either dedicated to this task, or alternate between cows, which implies a highly individualised approach to the animals.

The nurse cow is good, the real mother is better. A wide variety of compromises have been made.

Some leave the calves to suckle their dairy mothers twice a day, leaving them together for varying lengths of time, some just for the duration of the feed, others for much longer.

Some separate the calves from the cows half the time, either during the day or at night, between milkings.

Others leave them together altogether, but as the months go by the calves drink more and more, which has a serious impact on the quantity of milk available for sale, so it is decided to wean them, and therefore separate them. This represents considerable stress for the calf.

All serious experiments leave contact with the mother for at least 3 months.

affected by this problem. It is often female researchers and young mothers who realise the seriousness of this violence against dairy cattle, given that the hormonal biology of the maternal bond is the same in all our species. Moreover, it should be pointed out that there is a glaring absence of research into the distress of cow-mothers, whereas the distress of small (cute...) calves is given more consideration. Unfortunately, many of the concerns expressed in these studies relate to issues of productivity, growth and health. As for the cow, questions of udder health, nutrition, metabolism and productivity are dealt with by a plethora of specialists for an extremely powerful and influential industry, in total denial of maternal feelings. It's high time that things change.

The difficulties in finding a solution without significant disadvantages show the extent to which this type of milk production is in conflict with the biology of mammals.

Approaches that maintain contact between cow and calf for 7 to 8 months are desirable. Various labels of varying degrees of ambition are being set up in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia, for the moment on a small scale and mainly for direct sale. In the Netherlands, milk labelled "Kalverliefde" (calf love) is sold in most major supermarkets (Albert Heijn, Plus). Once again (as with chickens...), the Dutch are creative and experiment with the best at home, but their companies practice the worst in France.

The fact remains that gentle, gradual separation, after the age of 3 months and as late as possible, in a stable group of calves, is currently the best alternative, and it is important to develop this voluntarily.

This does not mean, however, that urgent measures should not be taken in the current context to improve the fate of calves taken from their mothers, i.e. to do away with all cage-like confinement and isolation, and to provide the necessary space and comfort as well as a healthier diet, in particular hay.

An in-depth study was carried out by A Vogt, K Barth, U König von Borstel: Can a Gradual Weaning and Separation Process Reduce Weaning Stress in Dam-Reared Dairy Calves? The experiment, which took place at the Thünen-Institut für ökologischen Landbau, covered a number of criteria. It compared weaning using the nose-flap method with a progressive separation method. The usual methods of assessing the stress generated need to be critically reviewed. Either the calf is fitted with a piece of plastic fixed in the nasal septum, which prevents it - from one day to the next - from suckling, but it remains close to its mother for 2 weeks and then has 1 week's contact through a fence, with the nose-flap removed. Or the contact time with the mother is gradually reduced, in three steps, while still allowing suckling during this increasingly limited contact time. Both methods generate a stress reaction. As a result, the sudden weaning of milk by the nose-flap has an impact on feeding behaviour and digestive health, and reduces playtime. The nose-flap is also likely to injure the nasal septum. The conclusion is that the nose-flap method cannot be considered favourable to animal welfare. Progressive separation, here in three steps, is preferable, but still generates stress and needs to be developed further.

A Danish study recommends weaning as early as 8 weeks (M Bertelsen, M Bak Jensen: Comparing weaning method in dairy calves with different dam-contact levels. J.Dairy Sci.TBC, 2023).

The fact that many experiments today involve weaning at 3 months is no doubt linked to the specific nature of organic farming, whereas conventionally reared calves are weaned much earlier. The 3-month requirement applies mainly to veal calves, bearing in mind that, apart from a few exceptions (direct sales, etc.), there is no organic veal calf sector.

II. CAP aid: improve the welfare of dairy veal calves now and develop sustainable solutions for the future

What aid is available for dairy veal calves?

As far as **first-pillar aid** is concerned, in the past coupled aid in France has been allocated to what is fraudulently known as "calves under their mother", that is beef-breed calves that are in fact forbidden to graze with their mothers and kept in cowsheds to ensure anaemic meat, with the only contact with the mother being suckling twice a day. These products are labelled, with a carcass quality argument, to create an unnatural added value. Aid was conditional on achieving a light colour, and therefore a certain degree of anaemia. The so-called "know-how" developed by the industry's technical council is an affront to the logic of "one health" and "one welfare".

As for **aid under the second pillar**, some is allocated to veal calf fattening buildings without taking any welfare aspects into account. The majority of veal calf fattening buildings are on slatted floors, and calves are usually kept in individual stalls until they reach the authorised age limit, i.e. 8 weeks⁵. The minimum standards for the protection of calves are scandalously inadequate, and the huge discrepancy with the EFSA's recent conclusions only confirms what anyone with the slightest knowledge could have known for a long time. Tragically, it also confirms the cruel ambiguity of IDELE, which claims to be a reference and training authority for breeders, yet has collaborated and continues to collaborate with a deplorable system (as have the industry's vets). Who can we trust? The integrators who operate this sordid system are in particular the Dutch feed manufacturers Denkavit and Van Drie. The fact that veal production and the number of veal fatteners are falling is therefore excellent news - contrary to Interbev's proclamation that it wants to stabilise veal production and consumption. But we still need to find a better outlet and a more sympathetic reception for the calves that continue to be born in the dairy system. The misfortunes of small calves during transport and at the allotment station have been well documented by NGOs. Denkavit and van Drie cannot claim to be concerned about animal welfare; shame on these companies.

More recently, the France Relance programme has contributed to the Maunon experimental station, where unfortunately only one project out of 3 breaks with the existing system, with an innovative and ambitious objective to improve the welfare of grass-fed dairy veal calves. However, this project is aimed at crossbred calves. So the approach is still carcass-based rather than welfare-based.

In Alsace there are a few sites where calves are fattened on straw, in relatively good conditions given the current situation. The impression is that this system is aimed primarily at Montbéliard calves, a mixed breed that produces better carcasses and a better price than Holsteins. We talk about welfare, but we don't get away from the 'carcass' logic. - A project in the Haut-Rhin region that seemed to be going rather well has come up against opposition from local residents, convinced to be in favour of environment but in fact counter-productive. The calves are being sent to Spain in large numbers, and the fattening conditions are not necessarily worse, or even better, than in France. But the end is likely to be a journey through hell: live exports for slaughter in countries where animal protection is far worse than in Europe, or even non-existent. Spain exports a lot of live animals.

⁵ see the image of the 'baby boxes' developed by integrator Van Drie

<https://www.elevagevandrie.fr/BibliRessources/PagesSystem/ViewNodeFile.ashx?idnode=1292>

The ill-being of the calves in this system is appalling. Note that the Van Drie website also features calves on straw under the heading "animal welfare"; however, these are not dairy breeds.

In these circuits, male Prim'Holstein calves remain the most miserable. Moreover, the weakest are euthanised. The euthanasia of male calves at birth, which is practised in some countries (and denounced by animal protectionists) is at least an honest solution that reveals what the current dairy system is all about. The European system is based on the long and arduous transport of small calves (amply documented by NGOs), including those from Eastern Europe, to fattening plants located mainly in the Netherlands, Spain and France. Legislation will probably evolve to ban the transport of young unweaned calves up to 5 weeks old and weighing less than 50 kg (Commission proposal). This is an EFSA recommendation; currently the standard is a minimum of 10 days age. However, any stress caused by transport and any mixing of calves from different origins generates a need for antibiotic treatment. These transports should stop and the calves should remain on the farm where they were born.

The best thing about the **2023-2027 CAP coupled aids** in France is that now they support the fattening of all cattle beyond the age of 16 months, whereas previously only suckler cows and dairy cows were rewarded. So it's a first step towards what needs to be done: raising animals to an advanced, adult age. There is also a certain link to forage areas, but unfortunately no incentive for actual grazing. It's a step in the right direction, but it's not enough.

Unfortunately, coupled aid for calves continues to target Label Rouge veal calves (labelled 'under the mother' but in fact separated and confined in the stable) and organic veal, mixed or cross-bred calves. This means that they are sticking to the "carcass" logic, continuing to support the nonsense of "white" anaemic veal, demanding quality criteria (conformation and fattening) and stubbornly ignoring the crying need to do something for dairy veal calves.

The fact remains that **the Regions have a number of tools at their disposal under the 2^{ème} pillar and non-surface aids** to deploy aids in support of more decent treatment of dairy calves. Now that the State has failed to act, it is up to the Regions to apply a modicum of ethics to their aids and to redirect the cruel and absurd dysfunctions.

What are the objectives for desirable and necessary aid?

The different levels of relevant approaches are articulated by starting with the first improvements to the current system to deal with the emergency, then laying the foundations for future developments, and finally experimenting to develop excellence.

1) A new foundation in the spirit of "one health"

Even today, the fattening of veal calves is largely based on the objective of clear meat, which implies a certain degree of anaemia, governed by the European directive on the protection of calves. The consequence of this objective is to prevent calves from being fed a physiological diet, which naturally consists of milk AND grass, grass containing iron, which is prohibited in the name of the anaemia sought. So the quest for light-coloured meat has a cascade of unnatural consequences.

Quotation tables show a price difference of almost €2 per kg live weight between "white" and "light pink" meat, and €2 per kg carcass weight between red and light pink (2021 figures). Such absurdity can only be maintained through deliberate ignorance.

It will therefore be necessary to put an end to any incentive to reduce iron intake and to any payment scale based on colour for all veal calves, in order to put an end to the cascade of harmful consequences. EFSA recommends (page 100 and summary page 6) that calves'

diets should consist of iron-rich feed such as roughage (e.g. hay), rather than solid feed in the form of straw, cereals and grains or iron-enriched milk replacer.⁶

Group housing should also be implemented **from the outset, with no isolation phase**. This is recommended in the EFSA Scientific Opinion of 2023.

All this (and telling the consumer the truth...) costs nothing and can be done immediately.

2) For fattening, housing that respects the needs of calves

More respectful housing means physical and thermal comfort, and therefore bedding; a healthy, bright environment, protected but open to the outside; enough space to allow calves to jump and run around a bit; a feeding system on demand, which allows more frequent feedings and also satisfies their need to suck.

Raising the level of ambition even further, there will be access to pasture, or at least an exercise area.

EFSA (2023) concludes that to express locomotor activity and play, at least 20m² per calf is required. It suggests a minimum regulatory area of 3m² per calf (currently the minimum is between 1.5 and 1.8m² per calf, depending on live weight, with some farmers giving slightly more). Access to the open air is not covered in this scientific opinion.

3) Helping to keep veal calves on the farm where they were born

We are proposing this original idea of aid that is particularly relevant to tackling the problems in depth and encouraging innovation by farmers. Not transporting or mixing calves will definitely and significantly reduce **antibiotic consumption**.

At present, the majority of dairy (and suckler) farms outsource a significant part of their impact, namely the male calves. For a real **transition to agro-ecology**, the farm will have to integrate all its animals into an autonomous and sustainable operation.

If the available forage is limited, a choice will have to be made: concentrate all the resources on a maximum number of dairy cows, or allocate some of the resources to calves and steers.

As the reduction in the production and consumption of animal proteins is inevitable, and as the risk of milk overproduction persists and milk prices are uncertain, this is an opportunity to rebalance milk and meat production under optimum and socially acceptable conditions.

Longer lactations can and should help to reduce the number of calves born.

The trend towards short, high-quality circuits means that grass-fattened calves and steers can be put to good use (a long-term objective to keep in mind!), combined with landscapes and well-being.

However, in the current context, aid per calf is essential to make this innovation and coherence economically viable.

4) Raising calves with nurse cows

There have been many experiments with such systems, with two or three calves allocated to a nurse cow. This system allows the calves to benefit from the presence of adult animals and to graze with them. It is often the calves that are bred for renewal that benefit from this

⁶ EFSA (2023) produced a lengthy presentation on the impact of the anaemia sought in the production of white veal. In so doing, it answers the question put to it, as it was asked. In fact, EFSA's recommendation to give hay to calves runs counter to the production of so-called white veal. It is regrettable that EFSA does not seem to have had the courage to come out more explicitly in favour of abandoning the production of so-called white veal. What's more, it recommends looking for non-invasive methods to assess the level of anaemia in calves, even though measuring haemoglobin levels is completely unnecessary as long as calves are given enough hay (and therefore iron). We can assume that scientists consider the industry's resistance to abandoning the absurdity of the white calf to be insurmountable - with France leading the way.

practice, which is very beneficial for the health and growth of the calves. It should therefore be opened up to male calves, with appropriate compensation and financial incentives. However, this system does not put an end to taking calves away from their mothers. A nurse is not the same, nurses don't lick the calves. Some farms allocate the role of nurse by alternating between cows. It is becoming difficult to go any further these days, without enough subsidies and substantial added value from the sale of milk and meat.

A particular case to consider is when dairy calves are reared under nurse cows on a partner farm.

5) Keeping dairy calves with their mothers

The most beneficial system for calves in the future, the most ambitious and the only system that can be described as 'natural', but also the furthest removed from usual practice, is **to keep the calf with its mother**. This option is by far the ideal; it provides a response to the full extent of the problem as recognised in the light of scientific knowledge and the emotional intelligence of our century. Its implementation on the ground depends on pioneering breeders, experimentation and innovation, and should be funded as such.

The first labels and private brands moving in this direction are emerging, abroad⁷ and in France⁸ (various projects in organic farming, and INRAE's COCCINELLE project), albeit with differing motivations and ethics. The most comprehensive and pragmatic study seems to have been drawn up by FIBL (Institut de Recherche de l'Agriculture Biologique)⁹. It includes examples of different weaning methods.

A well-known system is to let the calf suckle next to its mother morning and evening, before or after milking. This gives the cow-calf pair very little time to spend together. Such a system prioritises feeding (which, in organic farming, must be whole milk) and neglects the emotional bond and the learning process. Partial separation, for example during the day or at night, is far preferable.

It is vital to clearly define what is expected. The very ambitious objective is for the calf to remain free with its mother and for weaning to be natural, i.e. at around 8 months of age, with no separation from the social group and no sale before the age at which veal calves are slaughtered. At the end of the line is on-farm slaughter. The slaughter age depends on the fodder available and the farm's commercial opportunities for milk and meat.

Leaving the male calf with its mother for a few weeks, for example 3 weeks, as some farmers do, and then selling it for intensive fattening at a higher price because of its good physical condition, does not count under any circumstances in this type of positive approach; the separation is too cruel.

CAP tools that can meet these needs

⁷ CORE organic: Calves with their dams in dairy cow systems, 2019.

<https://kuhpluskalb.de/>

<https://deokomelkburen.de/muttergebundenekaelberaufzucht/>

⁸ <https://www.inrae.fr/evenements/webinaire-repenser-lelevage-veaux-laitiers-retablir-lien-mere-jeune>

<https://www.produire-bio.fr/articles-pratiques/elevage-des-genisses-laitieres-sous-la-mere/> This project concerns replacement heifers. Here, the males are sold at 3 weeks of age, which is not at all in keeping with an ethical approach; it's more a question of simplifying the work.

<https://www.inrae.fr/actualites/co-concevoir-citoyens-nouvel-elevage-laitier-ecologique-montagne-coccinelle>

⁹ FIBL: <https://www.fibl.org/fr/boutique/2520-veaux-sous-la-mere>

A. Cross-compliance: ensure a good basis

Cross-compliance includes minimum standards for animal protection. It also has the possibility of including good practices that go beyond the minimum standards, as a basis for good professional practice. This can and must be applied to animal welfare - all that's missing is the political will.

B. The eco-regime: improved practices on a voluntary basis

The eco-regime can, and we believe absolutely must, include support for animal welfare. It can reward superior practices such as pig rearing with litter and outdoor runs, free-range poultry rearing, or maternity units with free-range boxes for sows. This tool is also appropriate for encouraging the rearing of calves on straw, in conditions that are better than the predominant standard.

C. Coupled aid: a relevant reorientation

In the past, coupled aid for calves was intended for calves under a so-called quality sign (which raises other questions that we have already mentioned) and for organic calves. Initially there were breed, carcass and colour criteria, and the colour criterion has fortunately been removed for organic calves¹⁰. However, for example, Jersey and Prim'Holstein calves are excluded from this aid, even though calves of these breeds need it.

For the record, dairy cows receive coupled aid. It is astonishing that such undifferentiated and unconditional aid can still be justified. Why not give it to their calves? And indirectly protect the image of dairy farmers? The purpose of coupled aid is not to finance the milk price war; what is needed is a much more proactive political commitment to fair prices and to controlling volumes.

D. Aid under the second pillar

In the 2023-2027 CAP as set out in the National Strategic Plan, land-based aid is the responsibility of the State and non-land-based aid is the responsibility of the Regions, which defend their own priorities. These priorities are generally along the lines of "combining competitiveness and environmental performance". Innovation in the way dairy calves are managed would be a sign of clear-sightedness and foresight.

This objective could target investment, marketing, experimentation, or compensate for additional costs.

The Regions generally support grass-fed livestock farming, and the Water Agencies are happy to co-finance CAP aid linked to grass as a water-protecting cover. It is unfortunate that this aid is never linked to animal welfare. The compartmentalisation of skills is an obstacle to sustainability. The Water Agencies are allowed to come to the aid of farms that use grass, so that these do not disappear as a result of economic difficulties. The Agencies are therefore good at doing social work, while the bulk of the CAP funds big tractors. But the grassland criterion alone, scattered across the country, is not enough to create coherent, innovative and sustainable sectors.

There is a crying need to break down the barriers between economic, environmental and animal welfare objectives.

¹⁰ <https://normandie.chambres-agriculture.fr/conseils-et-services/gerer-son-exploitation/pac/aides-couplees/aides-aux-veaux-sous-la-mere-et-veaux-bio/> It is therefore accepted that the colour criterion is nonsense.

III. In the medium and long term: rethinking and reorienting milk production

Overhaul the milk-meat balance, produce steers, extend lactations

The respective interests of the suckler and dairy sectors are in competition for meat. The two sectors are mobilising in the face of the inescapable imperative, backed up by numerous forecasts, to reduce animal protein consumption, because of planetary boundaries and for reasons of health and ethics. Sustainable animal feed and carbon storage are on everyone's lips. On the one hand, there is talk of the benefits of mixed breeds and hardy breeds. On the other, we're banking on continued increases in dairy performance and on export markets.

Today, the young age of veal calves at the time of slaughter is a way of clearing the red meat market. So we have both overproduction and unbearable distress for calves and their mothers. We need to draw all the necessary conclusions.

The fact that suckler beef farmers are struggling to make a living and milk producers are complaining so much about the price of milk can only reinforce the certainty that all equilibrium has been lost and that the whole system needs to be overhauled.

Revisiting dairy ideology

There's no doubt about it, milk is an excellent food. Animal milk has also enabled people in grassland areas of the world to survive, as it did in our mountainous regions. Cheese is a brilliant way of preserving food. Western farmers are going through a painful heartbreak. Heirs to an endearing model, where the cow provides the family's livelihood, the birds sing, and the herd is driven to pasture, their "passion" for their profession has been directed towards genetics, robotics, digital technology, high volumes and "economies of scale" (for dairies!) - enough to siphon off money from the CAP. Agriculture and food have become industrial and subject to industrial logic. Industrial milk has conquered the world, just like Coca-Cola. A certain loss of meaning needs to be compensated for by new rhetoric. The dairy multinationals have huge advertising budgets and work on the 'image' of their products. Europe has financed the promotion of milk with tens of millions of euros. The distribution of dairy products in schools, paid for by Europe, is designed to mould future consumers. Milk is good, but by no means essential. Nutritional recommendations for dairy rations are merely an adaptation to an existing economy. A balanced diet can be achieved without dairy products. In wealthy Western societies, deficiencies are found in fruit and vegetables, fibre and micronutrients, against which dairy products are irrelevant, but rather in the risk of obesity and metabolic diseases.

But today, the dairy industry wants people to believe that there is a global milk shortage and that French production is superior in terms of environmental impact per kilo of milk. The industry has a short memory. A few years ago, European taxpayers were funding subsidies to reduce milk production, because of overproduction and collapsing prices: while one farmer was receiving public money to supply less milk, his neighbour was perfectly free to increase its milk production. By 2023 prices had finally recovered... but by 2024 the lamentations were already back.

Black oil or white liquid: from waste to sobriety

The imperative need to reduce animal protein has much in common with the imperative to move away from a fossil fuel and plastic society. Yet there is intense scientific and lobbying activity to find ways of reducing the climate footprint of dairy cows, mainly through feed additives and intensification, and to reject the conclusion that we need to reduce production and livestock numbers. They would even have us believe that livestock farming in France can offset GHG emissions from other sectors and cash in on carbon credits for having applied a few measures to reduce emissions. In fact, grassland can offset between a third and a fifth of the emissions from cows, or even less, and any serious offsetting requires a considerable reduction in stocking rates, and therefore in livestock numbers. Moreover, dairy farming does not even include the emissions caused by its male animals in its balance sheets. A deliberate reduction in livestock numbers beyond the downward trend is inevitable, while preserving grasslands. It's time for the livestock industry's forecasts, in Europe¹¹ and in the¹² regions, to recognise this.

There is no question of stopping all milk production. The best and most readily acceptable solution is to use the CAP to create opportunities for a way out of the current situation, which is threefold tragic for animals, farmers and the climate, by moving towards a new balance that is more useful, sustainable, acceptable and remunerative.

Here are a few **key levers that complement the measures proposed for dairy calves**:

- The CAP must support the fattening of large cattle in pasture, which implies **coupled aid for all LUs in pasture, and in particular for steers, regardless of racial type**, in order to ensure the economic viability of this production. This will create income **while reducing the number of cows and calves**, which are sources of impact, overproduction, structural waste and animal distress, and, in a positive way, develop autonomous and coherent systems that promote well-being in the regions. The age of slaughter (ideally adult) may also vary depending on the situation. Animal welfare has priority.
- In dairy systems, one of the best ways of reducing the number of calves is **to lengthen lactations**. This should become a selection objective.
- **Reducing consumption of dairy products** is an essential part of the journey towards a sustainable and ethical diet.

IV. Research and experimentation: concerns and expectations

Research and experimentation are essential. First of all, we need to ensure that the funding reaches the farmers themselves, who are exploring these new practices that will be increasingly necessary if dairy farming is to become socially acceptable. We need proactive and creative development of innovative systems with a human face. It's not the much vaunted digitalisation that will solve the problems outlined. CAP money must reach farmers so that they can meet our values, and it must reach farm animals, without this money being captured and diverted by the upstream and downstream sectors.

We must finally stop funding research into unacceptable systems. The veal industry is starting trials at a new station in Mauron¹³ on three models for fattening veal calves. One of the three models seems to meet society's expectations, but not the other two, which are essentially concerned with

¹¹ EU agricultural outlook for markets, income and environment 2020-2030, December 2020

¹² Grand Est regional biomass plan

¹³ <https://www.agri-mutuel.com/elevage/ae-mauron-56-bientat-une-station-de-480-places-avec-accas-plein-air/>

ventilation. It would have been much more relevant to study and develop three frankly alternative models. We need to stop funding trials, even on feed, on obsolete systems that are recognised as incompatible with the animals' needs.

It is also very worrying that the problem of male dairy veal calves is being tackled solely from the point of view of adding value. We are seeing a tendency to cross dairy cows with Belgian blue-white bulls in order to increase the value of the calves. These crosses should be discouraged and excluded from any aid. The Belgian blue-white is a deformed breed based on an (abnormal) mutation, and it uses Caesarean sections.

It's time for the animal sectors to understand what society is criticising them for. As long as research sees animals in terms of carcasses and not as sensitive, intelligent beings with emotional needs, humanity will not be able to move towards sustainable management of its planet. As long as it is considered normal to take a calf away from its mother, it will also be considered normal to take a son away from his mother to send him off to war.

If France is reputed to be 'lagging behind' when it comes to animal welfare, this is undoubtedly due to the lack of independent research, driven by a genuine desire to improve welfare and free from the constraint (imposed by the government or partner technical institutes) of having to defend existing systems. **It is all the more gratifying that INRAE has started work on maintaining cow-calf contact. This is a start. We should be hoping for more resources and more ambition in this type of work.**