

How Wageningen Research is defending the interests of the Dutch veal industry instead of studying local fattening

Comment by Anne Vonesch on :

Study on shifting from transport of unweaned dairy calves over long distance to local rearing and fattening

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What are we talking about?

Many thanks to Wageningen Research for **deciphering the available statistics**, with all their approximations. In 2020, the EU and the UK had 22.6 million dairy cows (page 15), giving birth to near to one calf a year. Around 30% of cows are slaughtered each year and replaced by young females. 70% of calves are *non-replacement dairy calves* (NRDC), i.e. dairy calves not used to replace dairy cows or the few breeding bulls. They are fattened to produce either veal or fattened for longer for beef. These are primarily male calves, but also females, especially those from cows of lesser genetic value. These so-called non-weaned calves are transported at a very young age to specialised fattening plants, before they have been weaned off a liquid milky diet. The minimum age at which calves can be collected from dairy farms in Europe is currently 14 days, and 28 days in Germany. The younger they are, the more vulnerable they are.

The following figures relate to the years 2015-2020. For a total of around 20 million NRDCs born in the EU per year (figure on page 32), around **1.4 million are transported across Member State borders, 42% of which (580,000 animals) are transported over distances of > 8 hours**. The main destinations are Spain (nearly 292,000), the Netherlands (134,000), Italy (56,000) and Belgium (45,000). **France is the leading country of origin for calves transported over long distances (115,000)**, on a par with Ireland, followed by Germany. 45% of calves leaving France travel long distances. France receives only 13,000. Smaller numbers of calves come from Eastern Europe.

With regard to transport, the report mentions non-compliances. According to official TRACES monitoring, 0.1-0.2% of consignments were found to be non-compliant in terms of animal welfare and 0.3-1.0% in terms of animal health. Especially for animal welfare, such low figures are not credible and can only be put down to the scarcity of checks on the ground and the complicity of the checks with the system, in view of the findings of the NGOs that follow such journeys and visit the rest stations, and in view of the assessment summarised in the Roadmap of the initiative to review the legislation¹.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12950-Animal-welfare-revision-of-EU-legislation_fr Initial impact analysis :

8) enforcement issues, further aggravated by the low quality of monitoring data and specific welfare indicators referred to in problem 2 above; Lack of coherent and strict enforcement by competent authorities of certain requirements, for instance those related to tail-docking of pigs and to exports of live animals to third countries. Also, for what concerns animal welfare during transport, **the current system is to a large extent paper-based and declarative, in that it depends, to a great extent, on information provided by the business operator, and proves to be ineffective** in allowing proper enforcement of the

In the wake of the scandals reported by NGOs, the long transport of small dairy calves has become a **key issue in the review of animal protection regulations**, and in particular those concerning transport.

The Wageningen Research report was likely to influence the Commission's proposal for a regulation. This is why some of the report's shortcomings are serious.

A botched study about local fattening operations

The title announces that the aim is to study how to move from long transports of unweaned calves to local fattening.

This is an excellent and particularly pertinent question, and the European Commission's DG SANTE deserves a great deal of credit for asking it.

But what does the study actually say?

The presentation of objectives identifies 3 themes (page 7)

- state of play,
- identification and analysis of existing alternatives to long-distance transport,
- assessment of alternatives and identification of best practice for transport (even long-distance transport).

The real subject, the transition to local fattening, has shrunk to one single page.

To (not) answer the question posed, the study uses **the 3Rs dialectic: replace, reduce, refine**. **But this does not correspond to the title, which promises to focus on local fattening**. The shift towards local fattening could indeed be achieved by 'replacing' (locally) and by 'reducing' through local actions. **But instead of developing this, Wageningen Research's response is mainly to develop 'refining' applied to even long transports, which no longer has anything to do with local fattening but responds to the strategies of the veal industry**. Among other things, the Dutch industry has declared its intention to move from long transports (> 8 or 9 hours) to short transports (in this case < 8 or 9 hours²) by 2026, while maintaining the arrival of calves.

The 'refine' strategy applied to long-distance transport is entitled to 10 pages.

The study does not even discuss a definition of what "local" means. Legally, the 8 or 9 hour threshold marks the distinction between so-called long journeys (above the 8 or 9 hour threshold) and so-called short journeys (below the threshold). But it would be disingenuous to consider that journeys of less than 8 or 9 hours would be equivalent to local fattening. For any normal citizen, 'local' means 'in the area'. Beyond the local there is the regional, beyond the regional the national, and beyond that the European. If ever 'local' relates (for Wageningen Research? for the European Commission?) to so-called short transport distances of less than 8 or 9 hours, we are manipulating the public, because that is not what

rules; There is lack of coordination on controls between authorities in the Member States involved, despite the Administrative Assistance and Cooperation (AAC) system in the Official Controls Regulation (OCR), and implementation of remedial action following non-compliance is uneven across the EU Member States. Evidence available, for example, shows a lack of enforcement of existing rules towards EU operators concerning the leg of the journey in Non6EU countries.

² The current threshold is 8 hours, and the future threshold, with the new regulation, could be 9 hours, **including 1 hour for feeding the calves**.

the words mean. The legal threshold of 8 or 9 hours and the notion of "local" (and relocation) are two concepts that have nothing to do with each other.

On page 57, the study gives a one-page response (and no more, out of a total of 73 pages of text) to the expectations of local fattening, with two solutions:

- **fattening on dairy farms that keep their calves:**

We have the example of southern Germany, but it would have been appropriate to add that **animal welfare conditions** for young cattle there are often not very recommendable: little space, high density, on slatted floors, in confinement.

We learn in one sentence that on **the small farms of the Eastern Member States most calves are fattened on the dairy farms where they are born** (repeated on page 75), whereas it is really a question of seeing how such systems work and how to develop their strengths without their shortcomings.

The rearing of calves with nurse cows or in contact with the mother (CCC system for cow-calf-contact) is mentioned in passing, even though it is **the system with the greatest interest for the future**. Except for the Dutch veal industry, of course.

And then there's the tired argument that **many dairy farms don't have the capacity to keep these calves, unless they reduce the number of cows**, which would reduce their income. **But this is precisely where the work of Wageningen Research should have begun, to explore how such a transition can be made viable and, why not, recommended and supported!**

- **fattening on specialised farms very close to dairy farms:**

According to the study, in some Member States **the majority of calves** are fattened on farms close to dairy farms (pages 57, 64, 76). No further details or curiosity.

Sweden and **Switzerland** are examples of ambitious models, and it is incomprehensible that these **two models** should have been dismissed out of hand by Wageningen Research, when they deserved to be studied in greater depth. These models are particularly attentive to the immense animal health challenge posed by the fattening of small calves. But **the study concludes that the Swiss model is unlikely to prevail**. Because the Dutch model is blocked ?

In short, the issue of local fattening is dealt with quickly and superficially, despite the fact that local fattening has considerable potential benefits in terms of animal health and welfare, which are mentioned in passing, but without arousing any more zeal (in contrast to the interest shown in lymphocyte levels etc linked to transport for the purpose of "refinement").

It would therefore have been necessary to describe the systems that allow local fattening, their strengths and weaknesses, the obstacles and the levers for action. But this was not done. What a disappointment !

The conclusion (page 81) states that **alternative strategies** (although not detailed) to reduce or replace long-distance transport of NRDC are used only marginally, which contradicts what is stated on pages 20, 58 and 59, 75 and 76, namely that in some Member States this is common practice and that in any case only a small percentage (but still 580,000 per year) of NRDC are transported over long distances.

The final conclusion simply states that these alternative strategies require further development before they can be applied on a large scale. You won't lose anything by writing this. Indeed, **it seems a rather evasive conclusion.**

Why is there so little interest in and support for these alternatives? Maybe because, particularly in Eastern Europe, small-scale farms are beyond the reach of young engineers looking for jobs in 'modern' agri-supplies ? While small-scale farmers are doomed to disappear in the tsunami of so-called performance and the mirage of competitiveness ?

Obviously, **local fattening is incompatible with the business of the veal and animal feed industry** in the Netherlands, such as Van Drie, Denkavit and others, which have operations in many countries.

Apart from local fattening, what are the other proposals ?

The study cites **the increase in milk production per cow**, making it possible to have fewer cows, and therefore fewer calves, for the same quantity of milk. This development has already helped to reduce the number of calves. But it goes against forage autonomy, economy, non-competition with human food and the promotion of grassland.

The study also cites **selection to lengthen lactations**, which increases the interval between births of calves, so there are fewer of them. Unfortunately, the study doesn't say a word more about this, even though it's an interesting possibility.

The main approach studied at length was to combine two approaches:

- **the use of sexed semen** to obtain female calves for high genetic value cows (with high milk production),
- **and beef bull semen** for cows of lesser genetic value, enabling the carcasses of calves, young cattle or steers to get a better price.

Cross-bred calves, from dairy cows (Holsteins) inseminated with beef bull semen, produce a better carcass, reach slaughter weight more quickly (which saves money), and are heavier for the same age when picked up at the farm of birth, which is a resilience factor for the journey and beneficial for the fattening farm. For all these reasons, a small cross-bred calf sells for a better price.

Sexed (dairy) semen is more expensive. Beef breed semen costs less than dairy semen. Cross-bred calves are more profitable. The two-pronged approach increases the farmer's income. This is demonstrated carefully and in detail in Appendix 6 of the study. In fact, it is (surprisingly) the only solution that is given a detailed appendix in the report.

Of course, the breeding lobby has a vested interest in this.

But how would this dual genetic approach reduce the need for long journeys? It could make fattening in the Member State of birth more profitable, like any fattening, whether local or (very) far away. Always assuming that there is a remunerative market for this increase in beef production, which is far from obvious.

It is therefore hard to see why this dual genetic approach should be the main means put forward to replace long-distance transport, given that the question of market balance arises everywhere. This is explained clearly on page 61, Member State by Member State.

But there's another idea too. It's that **heavier calves are more resilient**, and that's part of the 'refinement' and therefore helps to reduce the negative impact of transport on the condition of calves moved to intensive fattening operations, whatever the length of the journey. **We are slipping surreptitiously into 'good practice' to justify continuing to transport calves** (whether for more or less than 8 or 9 hours).

What's disturbing about the recommended racial approach is that one of the crosses highlighted is insemination with Belgian blue-white (page 16), which is becoming increasingly fashionable, particularly in Denmark. According to Wikipedia, this paternity could earn €200 when the calf is sold. This deformed breed is distinguished by a genetic anomaly, the culard gene, which causes profitable muscle hypertrophy. This means that the cows, which also develop abnormal muscle mass, can only give birth by caesarean section. Sweden tried to ban imports and cross-breeding of this breed, but the European Court of Justice ruled that these bans were contrary to European law. Shame on European law devoted to the idolatry of free competition in a merciless market. Animal welfare NGOs are unanimous in denouncing the use of this breed.

Calf transport: an adjustment variable for an absurd and cruel economic system

The study looks at the consequences and difficulties of abandoning long-distance transport for the Member States most concerned. These are classic arguments such as: dairy farms are not equipped to fatten calves; extra calves would create problems of environmental impact; in this case, the number of cows would have to be reduced; France does not have the capacity to fatten all the calves it produces; the Netherlands imports calves because, for environmental reasons, its cow numbers are falling; integrators need economies of scale; a ban on long transport would mean an increase in transport of less than 8 or 9 hours to supply existing sectors. If production is not adapted to the market, the environment, the structures, the available resources, etc., then the **animals are transported instead of correcting the various inadequacies** at the base, by restructuring and, among other things, by modifying CAP subsidies. Unfortunately, this is a classic case in animal production: on the pretext of correcting one error, we add the next.

Page 21 refers to an **increase in methane emissions** if you switch from pale meat to pink meat, i.e. if rumination takes place. Are you starting to talk about methane? So don't muddy the waters! Let's go all the way! **Let's reduce the number of cows**, which will reduce the number of calves, and that's the best way of dealing with all the problems of climate, excess nitrogen, the excess and the distress of calves, and a whole host of other problems including the price of milk. There's a clear need for a global view.

Is transporting these unfortunate little calves the right response to the major challenges facing our society?

- respect for the living world, and in particular the needs of calves, the cow-calf bond, immunity, trust, life in the herd, the freedom to run, the taste of grass, rain and sun on the skin, etc?
- the great distress of end-of-career cows?
- planetary limits (climate, nitrogen and water cycles, biodiversity, soil, etc.)?

- the impact of transport and its hidden costs?
- combating the waste of food and other resources?
- a healthy diet?
- fair prices and viable farms, especially small farms?
- hidden costs (externalities) taken into account?
- the need for a more relevant CAP?
- the end of pesticides?

Was it really DG SANTE's request to detail only the economic reasons, advantages and disadvantages of transporting calves, and to exclude all the other advantages and disadvantages from the discussion?

The logic of calf pricing and the economies of scale achieved by industrial integrators are **petty and even perverse objectives and arguments** in the face of all the major challenges facing humanity. The principle of realism has a lot to answer for. **Defending the status quo on the pretext of realism is irresponsible.** The economic system is built and driven by human decisions, which are also capable of modifying the regulatory framework.

Now, for once, let's adopt a strictly ethical point of view. The only reason for transporting an animal over long distances is to get it to a place where it will be happier than where it was before, or at least happier than it would have been if it had not been transported.

Yes, it's high time we talked about the destination of this transport! The conditions under which calves are fattened in the majority of specialist fatteners, particularly Dutch integrators such as those that have set up in France, **are appalling.** Here's the system: the calf is torn away from its mother, isolated, transported, locked up alone in a cage called a baby-box, only to have a few barriers removed at the age of 8 weeks, forced to eat a diet contrary to its nature, and deprived of everything that makes its life worth living. The good thing about killing male calves at birth is that at least it's not hypocritical, but honest about the true nature of the dairy system. The veal industry could have reformed their system a long time ago, they knew perfectly well what they were doing. Now, under pressure from public opinion, they are talking about and displaying 'animal welfare'. Too late, gentlemen. You need to earn credibility.

As for Spain, without prejudging the fattening conditions, which may not be as bad as in some other countries, these calves are either slaughtered in Spain or exported live (in significant numbers) by vessel to countries which practice slaughter without stunning and which are not known for their high level of animal protection. Vessels loaded in Spanish ports do not get good press. As for animal feed, Spain is globally dependent on imports, particularly from Ukraine. Yet another glorious page in the history of free trade and competitiveness in our single market, paid for by the distress of animals!

On the other hand, keeping calves on the farm where they were born is an opportunity to improve their living conditions in the short term and, when the time is ripe and the economic framework compatible, to establish long-term contact between the cow and her calf. **Respect for the living world is the farmer's business, and the remuneration due for this respect must go back to the farmer and his animals.**

Maintaining transport, the great victory for the evil lobbies

Putting aside 'replace' - which was the main subject! - is unfortunately used to **move on to 'refine', to 'refinement', in other words to apply 'good practice' for transport that lasts**, whether it is 'short' or even and above all 'long' (page 64), because otherwise certain sectors, especially Spain, would be in difficulty. This is one of those famous 'tailor-made' approaches! It will enable us to **continue exporting and importing calves**.

As a result, we find in the summary table at the end, a good fifteen times, the mention **"For all the elements mentioned under this heading: a number of players in the industry are in the process of adopting these practices either in accordance with national guides to good practice (Ireland) or in quality assurance systems (Netherlands)"**.

There is no longer any mention of Spain, the leading importer of long-journey calves.

A first impression might be one of relief. The competent authorities in the Member States have been incapable of enforcing the protection of animals during transport. They are equally incapable of doing so when it comes to farms and slaughterhouses. So **private initiatives are taking matters into their own hands!** So much the better. Finally. As part of CSR. Under pressure from public opinion. We're making progress! With the support of scientists, of course. Quality assurance creates better-paying jobs than farming and rearing calves. There will be better-equipped lorries (expensive on the one hand but profitable on the other - we're innovating!). Better-trained staff (not very expensive: €241 per person according to the proposed regulation). Better computerised controls (a source of savings). An unchanged dairy system: milk flows freely, the industry breaks it down and recomposes it, and its products are exported. Engineers need to work on the profitability of calves; that's what they've learnt, that's what they know how to do. And researchers need to take blood samples from transported calves to find out more about the factors that improve their resilience. Antibiotics help to control mortality.

Irony aside, **the study by Wageningen Research suggests collusion with the veal industry**. The Netherlands is the largest importer and producer of veal. Their feed manufacturers and veal production integrators Van Drie and Denkavit are established in many countries, including France, where they operate a system of factory farming that is incompatible with the needs and welfare of calves. How can we help but think that the Dutch are being hypocritical when the industry presents itself as virtuous by pledging to put an end to long-distance transport by 2026? And what credit do they deserve if they finally start moving? After decades of exhausting work by animal protection NGOs? Move at last with the sole aim of continuing their business?

The Netherlands obviously also has a large transport business and is capable of innovating in terms of lorry equipment.

The interests of the sector are to maintain transport, or at any rate **to maintain the arrival of large numbers of calves**. That's why 'best practice' of transport is so much more attractive than local fattening.

However, the criticisms must be tempered. Clearly, the study is based on the "all other things being equal" hypothesis. This is very bad. But it can be defended on **the grounds of realism and the need for short-term solutions**, given that all the **balance of power** means that the existing industrial agricultural sectors - meat, dairy and genetic selection - are not questioned. But is such a stance worthy of a scientific institution that prides itself on its

ability to provide solutions for the future? Shouldn't we be thinking a little further ahead than 'all other things being equal'? The world is unstable.

From a responsible scientific body, we have the right to expect :

- **strict independence from the** meat, dairy, animal feed and genetics **industries and lobbies** (which does not rule out listening to everyone's concerns and competence)
- **a global vision** capable of integrating, and never forgetting, the **animal's mental state** as well as the various **planetary limits**.

Channelling the debate around the long transport of calves is a way of avoiding the real big debate of the future, i.e. debating the relevance of the dairy industry.

Let's quote Albert Schweitzer: "**I am life that wants to live, surrounded by life that wants to live.**"

Let's complete the picture: "**I am life that wants to love, surrounded by life that wants to love.**" That means a lot to cows and calves.

We would like Wageningen Research to do more to cope with the ethical challenge.