



Environmental enrichment – Justification

HF.17 - It is recommended that all animals in the milking herd including dry cows have access to environmental enrichment during the housed period.

Justification

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that shows benefits from giving dairy cows opportunities for positive experiences and to express natural behaviours. This is accompanied by increasing societal expectations that farm animal welfare should support a good quality of life.

Environmental enrichment provides cattle with additional opportunities for stimulation, choice and the expression of natural behaviours, including grooming, exploration, foraging, movement and positive social interaction. Housed environments are designed around animals' essential needs, such as feeding, resting and safe management, but may provide less behavioural variety than outdoor environments. Appropriate enrichment can therefore improve the quality of the housed environment and support positive welfare, rather than focusing only on the avoidance of poor welfare.

Enrichment should be relevant to cattle and provide a meaningful benefit to the animals. It can include physical enrichment, such as cow brushes or suitable scratching surfaces; feeding enrichment, including appropriate variety in feed type, texture or presentation; and environmental opportunities such as access to loafing, exercise or outdoor areas. Providing choice and allowing animals some control over how they interact with their environment are important principles of effective enrichment.

Research demonstrates that cattle are motivated to use enrichment resources, particularly brushes, which support grooming of body areas that may otherwise be difficult to reach. Research indicates that appropriate enrichment can increase opportunities for grooming, exploration, play and other species-relevant behaviours. It can also reduce undesirable outcomes such as aggression and stereotypic behaviour, and influence activity patterns, although responses vary according to the enrichment provided, housing system and animals studied.

Including dry cows is important because their welfare and behavioural needs continue throughout the non-lactating period. Dry cows may be managed separately from the milking group, but they should not be overlooked when considering the quality and complexity of the housed environment. Applying the recommendation to the whole adult dairy herd provides a consistent welfare expectation across production stages, while allowing the type of enrichment to be adapted to the animals, housing arrangements and farm system.

The recommendation is deliberately outcome-focused and does not prescribe a particular enrichment item. Farms differ in their layout, management and resources, and many may already provide forms of enrichment through brushes, scratching surfaces, varied feeding opportunities, comfortable loafing areas or access to suitable outdoor areas. This flexible approach allows



members to select safe, practical and biologically relevant options while avoiding enrichment that presents an injury, hygiene, competition or management risk.

Providing appropriate enrichment can therefore help cattle remain behaviourally engaged during periods of housing, support grooming and other natural behaviours, and provide opportunities for positive welfare experiences. Some forms of enrichment may also provide practical or production co-benefits. For example, brush provision can improve coat cleanliness and some studies have reported increased milk production, although evidence for consistent effects on productivity and health remains limited. As a recommendation rather than a mandatory standard, it establishes a clear direction of travel for dairy cow welfare while recognising that the evidence base is stronger for some enrichment approaches than others and that practical application across different adult-cow housing systems varies.

References

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