

Individual dairy cow data management at Belgian pilot farm De Hooibeekhoeve

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Belgium has an overall milk production of about 3,7 billion litres, produced by 7.300 dairy producers. The production has increased by 10% in 2016 versus 2015. The Belgian dairy sector has a large variation. The northern (Dutch speaking part) is the most important region for milk production. 2/3 of the milk is produced in this part. The average production per dairy producer is 500.000 litres, but the range between the farms varies a lot. For instance, 1000 dairy producers produce 1/3 of the total milk. The Belgian dairy farms are mostly farms with an intensive production. Belgium is a small and densely populated country where ground and space are limited. In previous years ground prices were significantly increased, so farmers try to maximise the roughage production on their ground (intensively mowing, in between crops, etc.). The availability of ground and labour are the most important challenges for the farmers in the next few years.

More and more trying automation to reduce labour. Also, sustainable milk production becomes a more important issue in Belgium. Finally, the legislation obliges the farmers to evolve in the case of manure (ammonia production). The farm income varies each year, depending on milk prices and costs. Since 2006 the direct costs have increased by 30% (mainly due to increased concentrate costs). The average cost per litre of milk is about 32 eurocent (exclusive labour). Milk prices are fluctuating, with the crisis last year. The farm income last year was about 2 eurocent per litre on average, but most of the farms had a negative income.

Pilot farm Hooibeekhoeve

De Hooibeekhoeve is a Knowledge Transformation Centre located in Geel. It is a farm that has space for 100 dairy cows (and 145 youngstock). They use 2 milking robots to milk the cows. They have a roughage production on 55 hectares of land. The most important crops are maize, grass, Lucerne, red clover and wheat. De Hooibeekhoeve is a professional dairy farm that conducts research in dairy cattle and fodder crops. In particular, they have research projects on fertility, health and antibiotics, nutrition, housing, water management and solar energy. It's a beautiful demonstration farm where dairy farmers can find a lot of information.

Data management

An important research and innovation topic at De Hooibeekhoeve is data management. Through data management, they can monitor the animals very closely, which has a positive impact on the socio-economic resilience of the farm. The more intense you can follow the cows and their results the better your business economics results are. De Hooibeekhoeve uses several (pilot) tools to collect data, like pedometers and The Herd Navigator (DeLaval).

Labour organisation

De Hooibeekhoeve is focused on research, which requires a lot of labour. The farm is, therefore, evolving in a direction that focuses heavily on automation. For example, they can rely on a calf feeding machine, on robots to keep the cows' cubicles clean and on two milking robots. In the meantime, their staff are available to focus on research and development.

Research Themes

EuroDairy drives the engine of innovations on 4 main themes at dairy farms: animal care, biodiversity, resource efficiency and socio-economic resilience. Find more info on these dairy topics here!

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