

Views on contentious practices in dairy farming: The case of early cow-calf separation

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ABSTRACT

The public has become increasingly interested in the welfare of food animals, but the food animal industries possess few mechanisms for public engagement. Here we present results from a web-based forum designed to allow stakeholders to share views on controversial issues in dairying. In response to the question “Should dairy calves be separated from the cow within the first few hours after birth?” participants were able to indicate “yes,” “no,” or “neutral” and either write a reason in support of their view or select reasons provided by other participants. Four independent groups of participants were recruited (a total of 163 people); 31% said they had no involvement in the dairy industry; the remaining 69% (with some involvement in the industry) were students or teachers (33%), animal advocates (13%), producers (11%), veterinarians (9%) and other dairy industry professionals (3%). Overall, little consensus existed among participants across groups; 44% chose “yes,” 48% “no,” and 9% “neutral.” Responses varied with demographics, with opposition to early separation higher among females, animal advocates, and those with no involvement with the dairy industry. A fifth group was recruited at a dairy industry conference (an additional 28 participants); 46% chose “yes,” 32% “no,” and 21% “neutral.” Across all 5 groups, opponents and supporters often referenced similar issues in the reasons they provided. Opponents of early separation contended that it is emotionally stressful for the calf and cow, it compromises calf and cow health, it is unnatural, and the industry can and should accommodate cow-calf pairs. In contrast, supporters of early separation reasoned that emotional distress is minimized by separating before bonds develop, that it promotes calf and cow health, and that the industry is limited in its ability to accommodate cow-calf pairs. These results illustrate the potential of web-based forums to identify areas of agreement and conflict among stakeholders, providing a basis for the development of practices that address shared concerns.

Key words

animal welfare; producer attitude; maternal filial bond; public engagement