Animal health in organic dairy farming in focus

Researchers have assessed the health status of dairy cows in organic farms. They developed and tested tools to support farmers in reducing the prevalence of production diseases.

Animal health status in organic dairy farming does not always meet consumers’ expectations. Improvements are crucial to support consumers’ confidence and retain their willingness to pay premium prices.

Existing health management strategies do not appropriately cover the multifactorial and highly complex interactions that affect the health of dairy cows and the high level of heterogeneity between individual farms. Thus, a systemic approach is required to identify the most appropriate management options to keep the prevalence of production diseases to a minimum.

The EU-funded IMPRO (Impact matrix analysis and cost-benefit calculations to improve management practices regarding health status in organic dairy farming) initiative developed diagnostic tools to improve management practices. The tools support an equifinal approach that takes into account that farms can lower the level of production diseases in different ways.

The approach includes the assessment of the herd health situation based on milk recording data; a participatory concept (involving farmer, veterinarian and advisor) and cost-benefit analyses as well as strategic targets, competence and control on implementation of measures and treatments.

Levels of production diseases varied greatly between organic farms in Germany, Spain, France and Sweden, despite common rules for organic farming. Farmers involved were positive about taking additional preventative measures to improve the health status of their herds. They believed this would result in improved herd physical performance, as well as greater cost effectiveness and improved job satisfaction. Farmers contributed to the creation of herd health monitoring strategies, which were broadly implemented.

Regarding the use of alternative treatments, effectiveness is judged doubtful without a consistent implementation of a lege-artis procedure, including early registration of symptoms, detailed diagnostic procedure, removal of the main causes, selection of the appropriate remedies, follow-up check of the recovery progress and documentation of the success of therapy.

IMPRO has contributed an innovative approach to deal with animal health management for organic but also conventional farming systems. A demanding task, it challenges participants to leave the old path, change perspectives and deal with complexity and uncertainty. Progress in reduced production diseases on organic dairy farms will also depend on changes in the market conditions as animal health is a relevant quality trait of the production process.
Final Report Summary - IMPRO (Impact matrix analysis and cost-benefit calculations to improve management practices regarding health status in organic dairy farming)

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Dairy cow, animal health, organic dairy farming, equifinal, animal health management, IMPRO

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