

Organic sector in need of a new approach to improve animal health

The organic dairy sector has been developing rapidly over the last decade. The existence of a premium price reflects (in part) the consumer expectation that animal health and welfare are better in organic than in conventional systems. Reducing the prevalence of production diseases (PDs) is a useful means of improving animal health. Results of on-farm assessments in four different European countries (DE, FR, SE, ES) within a European research project revealed that PDs varied a lot between organic farms and did not generally differ from levels reported in conventional dairy farms. It may be concluded that the enhanced minimum standards approach has failed to promote a reduction in PDs.



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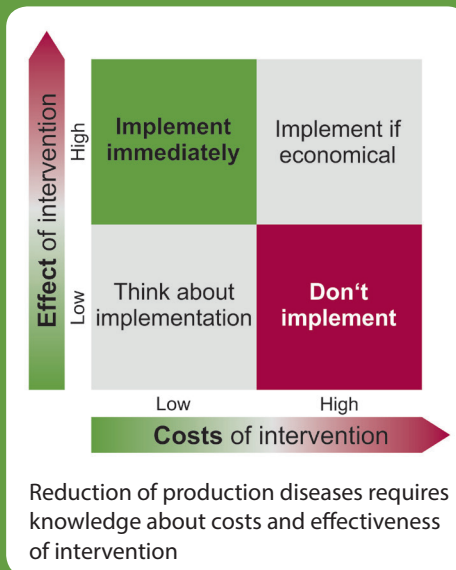
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Exploration of policy options

The large PD variation amongst organic dairy farms goes against consumers' expectations and conflicts with the ethos of a brand label reflecting greater homogeneity. The EC should focus on farms with below-average performance. Such large variation constitutes unfair competition, as organic farmers all receive the same price for their products although the quality differs in terms of PDs and product standard. Farmers who produce products at lower production costs yet risk higher prevalence of PDs are favoured above farmers who invest money, time and effort without obtaining premium prices for higher quality. Thus, this 'unfair' competition is an important impediment to any possible improvements. To reduce and prevent unfair competition, regular monitoring of health data (including milk recording data) is required. In the IMPRO project, tools have been constructed that might serve as a basis of possible monitoring approaches. Minimum standards should be supplemented by target values with respect to the prevalence of PDs. These should not be exceeded without facing significant consequences. Processors, manufacturers and retailers should be encouraged to force farmers to change their attitude to tackling PDs through a two-pronged approach e.g. by offering bonuses when a low prevalence of PDs has been achieved and penalties when a high one is present, in order to bring the milk payment system more in line with the high value expected of organic dairy products.

Farm centric and equifinal approach

Generalised recommendations for health measures are often ineffective and inefficient as they do not always suit the specific farm situation. Farmers are often not fully aware which investments would provide an appropriate return of expenditure. To overcome this barrier, a farm centric and *equifinal* approach is recommended, based on the principle that the same end state (low level of PDs) can be achieved via many different paths. Within the IMPRO-project, different tools for a diagnostic work, health monitoring and cost-benefit calculation on a farm level have been developed. Farmers would be encouraged to work towards a low level of PDs if this goal were mandatory for all organic competitors. Competition would be an effective motivator if reduced levels of PDs made an impact on farmers' market returns. The new farm centric and *equifinal* approach will be beneficial in improving the currently unsatisfying situation.



Contact details:
Albert Sundrum, University of Kassel, Germany
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