



# The welfare of dairy cows in organic milk production systems

## Background

In recent years there has been a large increase in the production and consumption of organically produced dairy produce. While the principles of organic farming are that animal health and welfare are primarily promoted by good management and care of animals, there is concern that in practice, some of the regulations placed on organic farming may be compromising cow welfare.

To investigate the issue of cow health and welfare on organic farms, we are focussing on 3 main issues:

1. Prevention and treatment of disease: is disease risk higher in organic or non-organic systems? Is there a difference in recovery rate? Are some treatments or management practices more effective than others in controlling disease?
2. Is there evidence that modern dairy cows are metabolically less well adapted to organic than non-organic dairy systems?
3. Are husbandry conditions better in either system? Do these conditions impose less 'environmental (behavioural) stress' on cows?

## Methods

Forty organic and 40 non-organic farms will be involved in the study, which focuses on farms with Holstein Friesian/Friesian cows and that have not recently converted to organic production. Organic and non-organic farms will be matched into pairs based on the genetic merit of cows, type of housing, geography and herd size.

A number of measures of health and behaviour will be taken on each farm:

- Lameness, presence of injury, skin disease and/or parasites. Incidence of disease and treatment given will be taken from farm health records and somatic cell counts from milk recorder data
- Metabolic profiles, an assessment of feed composition, cow body condition and farmer records of fertility
- Levels of cow aggression, responses to a mild stressor, behavioural time budgets (how the cows spend their time) and response to an unfamiliar handler

- Building quality, stockhandler experience and stocking density



Recording cow behaviour

### Outcomes

The results will be fed back to the sponsors, partners and participating farmers. The project will provide information on the standards of welfare on both types of farms and the efficacy of the common forms of treatment. It will also give information on best practice on both organic and non-organic farms with respect to cow welfare.

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