

Survey of husbandry and health on UK commercial dairy goat farms

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Introduction

The UK dairy goat industry is small and decentralised compared with the UK dairy cattle industry – with approximately 46,000 dairy goats commercially farmed over 120 farms in England and Wales.

To date, published studies on goat health, welfare and production are scarce, particularly those concerning UK dairy goats. This study aims to help address this knowledge gap by investigating the current practices and concerns within the UK dairy goat industry.

Approach

In November 2017, a postal survey was distributed to all members of the Milking Goat Association. There were 55 questions in total, with subparts comprising both open and closed questions. To increase the return rate, the survey was designed to be completed within 15 minutes, with no requirement to locate exact figures. The information collected by the survey included husbandry in kids and milking goats, types of diseases, vaccines used, herd sizes, farmers' observations of kids and milking goats and farmers' priorities for future research.

Results

Of the 70 Milking Goat Association members, 51 (72.9 per cent) responded – representing approximately 38 per cent

KEY FINDINGS

- This study provides a better understanding of the current practices and concerns in the UK dairy goat industry.

of commercial dairy goat farms and 53 per cent of the commercial dairy goat population in England and Wales.

Herd sizes ranged from six to 2300 goats, with a median of 400 goats. Reported milk yields ranged from 700 to 1800 l/goat/year, with a median of 1022 l/goat/year. All farms reared their own replacement goats, and 67.3 per cent of farms practised out-of-season breeding. Grazing occurred on 17 per cent of farms, with the remainder housing goats year-round.

Farmers removed kids from their mothers at birth or within 48 hours on 21.3 per cent and 52 per cent of farms, respectively. Forty per cent routinely fed the kid colostrum from a source other than its mother, and 10.8 per cent pasteurised colostrum before feeding it. Only 10.8 per cent of farmers measured colostrum quality.

Most farmers (87 per cent) reared kids on milk replacer, with 85 per cent offering this ad libitum. Almost half of the farmers offered kids creep feed and forage in the first week of life. Disbudding was common for kids under 14 days of age, and 75 per cent of farmers had a market for some of their male kids.

All farmers fed their milking goats forage, with 24 per cent offering an individual ration of concentrate in the parlour, ensuring the intake of individual goats was known. The remaining farms offered goats concentrate while housed in their pens, either ad libitum or calculated as a set amount per goat.

Routine hygiene practices, such as teat wiping and dipping, were minimal, and

17 per cent of farms did not use any sort of udder preparation. All farmers were aware of the main infectious diseases of dairy goats, but 20 per cent experienced problems accessing knowledgeable veterinary support. Almost half of the farms reported that they had been affected by Johne's disease, and 56.5 per cent of farmers routinely vaccinated for this disease.

Farmers reported pneumonia and diarrhoea as the most prevalent illnesses of kids. Pneumonia, diarrhoea, failure to conceive and poor growth were the most prevalent conditions of youngstock, with high body condition scores, assisted kidding, failure to conceive and difficulty drying off being the most prevalent conditions of milking goats.

Farmers' top priorities for further research were kid health (79.5 per cent), Johne's disease (69.5 per cent), TB (59 per cent) and nutrition (47.7 per cent).

Interpretation

A substantial proportion of the UK commercial dairy goat population was represented by this survey, although findings are skewed towards larger farms – probably because these are more likely to be Milking Goat Association members.

The farmer observations of clinical signs in their goats provide useful information but have their limitations and biases. For example, detection and interpretation of the various signs will vary between farmers. As such, these findings will need to be interpreted with caution.

Significance of findings

This study provides a better understanding of the current practices and concerns on UK dairy goat farms. This information will ensure that future research into dairy goat health and welfare can be targeted to areas where the most impact can be made.

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