

Progressive Dairy Operators Tour report:

Lessons learned from Swedish Pasture Legislation

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A part of their quest for excellence in dairy herd management, the Progressive Dairy Operators group has organized numerous local and international tours. Last August, 60 members of the group visited 16 exceptional dairy herds in Sweden and Denmark, with two primary objectives. The dairy sector in these countries is well positioned to produce milk efficiently, but producers have faced some challenges that are just emerging as issues for our industry here. Labour costs in these countries are very high and as a result dairy farmers have been quicker to adopt further automation such as automatic feeding and bedding. Learning about these technologies was one goal of the tour and it will be covered in future articles. These countries are also much more experienced in dealing with consumer demands for animal welfare standards, so learning how the industry has responded to this was another goal of the trip.

In that respect, Sweden's pasture legislation became the subject of much discussion among ourselves and with the farmers and experts we visited. Swedish society has adopted very comprehensive animal protection legislation and feels they are world leaders in this area. Livestock welfare has been a high profile topic in Sweden for many years, primarily because of Astrid Lindgren. This famous author of the Pippi Longstocking books wrote extensively about rural life in the 1950's. She objected to intensive livestock management practices and she wrote a book entitled "My Cows Want to Have Fun" which is still widely read and quoted. The animal protection laws were enacted by the Swedish parliament in 1987 as an 80'th birthday present for Astrid. While many of the standards in the law are clearly beneficial and reasonable, the pasture requirement has become a serious problem for well managed modern dairies. The legislation requires that all female cattle over 6 months of age are pastured for 8 hours per day for at least two months per year in northern Sweden and four months per year in the south. In these periods cows must be locked out of the barn and detailed records must be kept. A team of inspectors monitors livestock operations, and fines for failing to comply can run into ten thousand dollars or more.

Three of the dairies we visited had chosen to produce organic milk, at least in part because the rules were not that different and they received an \$0.11 per liter premium. The pasture requirements for these herds were comparable in terms of the number of days but as a minimum, 50% of the dry matter consumed in the pasture months had to be from organic

grass. Unlike in Canada, organic farmers in Sweden are also allowed to use antibiotics to treat sick animals. Organic milk consumption is about 10% of the total market in Sweden.

The three conventional dairies we visited all expressed major frustration with the pasture law. In their experience milk production always goes down when cows are turned out, because feed quality and intake is unpredictable. They also complained about an increase in clinical mastitis incidence and higher cell counts in the pasture season and they reported extra labour was needed to incorporate this dramatic change in management. Two of these dairies had adopted robotic milking which meant they also had to deal with the challenges of maintaining voluntary milking frequency when cows are further from the robots and access is restricted. In the eyes of these producers, complying with these regulations cost them money every year and made them less competitive with other countries in the European Union. The Swedish dairy industry is shrinking and in their eyes the requirement to pasture is a contributing factor.

In contrast Danish farms are not required to pasture and although processors pay a premium for milk from pastured cows the use of pasture in Denmark is decreasing. In our own discussions about this issue we recognized that the circumstances in Sweden made it nearly impossible for producers to take proactive steps to prevent this restriction from being placed on them. Since our group did not feel that such restrictive policies were beneficial, on one of our longer rides on the bus we organized a formal brainstorming session to develop strategies to ensure that Canadian consumers would never require this of us. The main things that came out of this discussion include the need to be proactive and to demonstrate that the welfare of cows housed in modern farms is excellent. The group felt that standards developed by the industry and audits to see that those standards are met are valuable, and consumer focussed open houses such as "breakfast on the farm" programs are needed to show the public that our cows are comfortable and well cared for. We also felt that unbiased research and field trials that define both the bad and the good sides of pasture vs. housed management is needed in Canada, so we can address public concerns. One specific problem that is clearly less severe in pastured cattle is lameness, so this is an issue we need to tackle with more consistent good management and also more research.

Our group also recognized that the pasture question is very strongly linked to industry image and that perhaps the image we promote may be sending the wrong message. It was pointed out that milk cartons and dairy promotion often feature pictures of grazing cows, and if this is not the real norm for our industry, perhaps we should try to raise the image of housed cows instead. Several people in the group felt that it was very important to actively defend our industry against the claims of animal rights groups. They offered "Dairy Carrie" as a good example of pro livestock agriculture activism.

Last on our list of options we discussed the possibility of an open door policy where cows could go out if they wanted, or possibly a requirement to provide some unrestrained time for cows housed in tiestalls. We also discussed giving consumers the option to pay a premium to reward farmers who put in the extra effort to provide grazing and suggested this could be best accomplished without actual product differentiation. Assuming the consumers who want cows pastured have this interest because they want to influence the management of the cows and not because they feel the milk is different, the "pasture premium" could be collected on any milk product with minimal differentiation in packaging and without setting up a separate distribution system, as long as the premium went to producers using pasture.

The last farm we visited in Sweden left a very clear and strong impression on us with respect to the grazing issue. The Wapno Gard Dairy milks 1400 organic cows and makes a point of involving consumers in their business. Consumers are encouraged to visit the farm and all the barns and the parlor have viewing platforms that allow the public to see what is happening. With thousands of visitors, the high standard of cleanliness, cow comfort and gentle handling is part of their daily reality here. The farm also features a retail store where dairy products processed on the farm are sold, and their branded milk is sold at a premium in grocery stores. Each year May 12th is a very special day at Wapno. That is when the 1400 cows and their offspring are first turned out to pasture. Many of us may have forgotten how cows respond when you first let them out, but there is no doubt that they look happy as they gambol around with tails in the air. And at Wapno, 6000 consumers come out on this day and line the roads around the farm to witness this event. Undoubtedly that sells a lot of milk for Wapno, but we imagine for those farmers lobbying to repeal the pasture legislation, no message could be worse than this.

In contrast our first stop in Denmark also included an open barn policy and retail milk sales. But in this herd the "story" incorporated modern technology like robotic milking as well as clean comfortable surroundings in the barn. While we visited there, two young moms drove into the yard and took their preschool children into the barn and sat by the calving pen while a cow licked off her newborn calf. And before they left, they bought their milk from a coin and credit card operated bulk dispenser in an unmanned separate retail area near the milk house.

Undoubtedly connecting with the consumer will become increasingly important to us here in Canada as well, but as we head in that direction we need to be very conscious of the messages we send.