

Excess Dairy Calves – understanding and improving pathways

Meabh Dore

Abstract

The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of stakeholders' opinions and preferences towards pathways for non-replacement dairy calves. The study was undertaken in the Teagasc Kerry-Limerick region. After pathways were identified, participants were intentionally sampled to represent the different pathways, farm sales, mart sales, export, and calf slaughter. Stakeholders were chosen based on their perspective of the supply chain to allow for a broad spectrum of views to be gathered. Key informants from the industry were interviewed including a mart manager, an agri-marketer, and a calf exporter, as well as key informants in extension; beef specialist, dairy-beef specialist, and dairy specialist. These interviews were thematically analysed using the RESET model. Through the analysis of the interviews, it became apparent that the farmers interviewed adopted a combination approach to calf pathways. The criteria farmers used for choosing calf markets included, *inter alia*, calf type, demand, price, cost, the time required, and logistics. Animal welfare emerged as a high priority for the farmers interviewed, and ensuring their animals were treated well. The stakeholders were concerned with animal welfare and its impact on market opportunities. The reliance on exports and the sustainability of current volumes of calves being exported also worried stakeholders. Maintaining Ireland's reputation is a priority for stakeholders as the domestic market could collapse if export options were threatened. The role of extension in improving calf markets was in the development of education courses and a national programme to promote awareness and collaborations between the dairy and beef sectors. Outside of education, extension was also seen to have a role in facilitating the building of relationships between stakeholders to develop a collective best practice that would help the balance within the industry and improve cooperation among the key players. In conclusion, areas of future research and potential improvement to the sector are recommended based on the findings and discussion on the interviews.