Dairy Australia
Your Levy at Work

Dairy welfare, we care

Animal husbandry survey 2016

Disclaimer

ISBN 978-1-925347-25-8

Animal husbandry survey 2016

The health and wellbeing of their cows is fundamental to the livelihood and success of every Australian dairy farmer. The dairy industry as a whole has a vision to ensure "every dairy animal is well cared for" and is striving to constantly improve and evolve animal husbandry practices on farms.

This commitment is underpinned by *the Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Cattle* (the Standards) released in January 2016. The Standards will be legal requirements that must be met by all dairy farmers, covering the critical range of on-farm management practices for cows, and their calves.

The Australian Dairy Industry Sustainability Framework has also set performance targets for animal welfare, reflecting industry policy.

To monitor and evaluate animal health and welfare practices, Dairy Australia has conducted an Animal Husbandry Survey since 2005. The data gathered is used to identify where the industry requires more support to improve practices and directly informs Dairy Australia's research, development and education programs.

Methodology

Survey data was obtained through 600 computer-assisted telephone interviews, with dairy farmers selected randomly from Dairy Australia's levy payer database.

Quotas were set in each dairy region to ensure that statistically robust samples were achieved.

A structured questionnaire formed the basis of the telephone interviews. Interviews were all conducted in accordance with ISO 20252 standards between 10 and 31 October 2016.

Issues covered by the 2016 survey include:

- awareness of industry standards
- herd nutrition programs and monitoring
- cow management and welfare including tail docking, calving induction, lameness, down cows, and heat stress mitigation
- calf management, including colostrum feeding, disbudding, transport, and euthanasia
- disease risk management and testing of introduced stock.

Highlights

The results from the 2016 survey highlight many significant improvements being made on dairy farms in key areas. However, as an industry we acknowledge there are areas where further improvement is required. Practice change takes time and the industry will continue to work to achieve this change to meet the expectations of industry, the community and consumers on how livestock should be treated on Australian dairy farms.

- Currently 65% of farms have a documented animal welfare protocol.
- Almost all dairy farmers (94%) have a means of monitoring herd nutrition.
- The number of calving inductions has almost halved since the 2014 survey.
- Tail docking for management purposes has fallen significantly since the 2014 survey, from 13% of farms to 9%.
- 95% of farmers have a lameness prevention strategy.
- Nine out of 10 dairy farms have a heat stress mitigation strategy.
- Care for down cows has improved considerably, with 64% being nursed in a dedicated area, and 69% checked every eight hours.
- Calves are typically provided with additional colostrum always (61%) or mostly (20%).
- Antibiotic treatment of sale calves has dropped from 41% to 27% over the last two years and when calves are treated 98% of farmers have systems in place to ensure withhold periods are met.
- Approximately 98% of calves that are transported are fed within six hours of the start of transport.
- The 3-Step Calf Plan is now being fully implemented in significantly more farms than two years ago (up from 40% in 2014 to 50%).

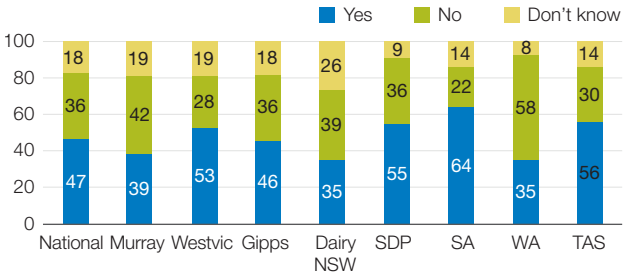
Farm management

Most dairy farmers are aware of their responsibilities for the care of their animals and are supportive of the need for documented guidelines and protocols to ensure good animal welfare outcomes.

Awareness of the Standards

- Copies of the new Standards were made available to all dairy farmers in late 2014. However, there is still lack of awareness of this document as only 47% say they have a copy.
- Respondents with larger herds are the most likely to say they have a copy.
- Some milk processors have been more successful than others in bringing the Standards to suppliers' attention.

Figure 1 Percentage of respondents who reported possessing a copy of the Standards, not possessing a copy and responding, 'Don't know' by dairy region.



Industry goals

All farmers comply with animal welfare legislation and standards.

All farmers adopt relevant industry recommended animal husbandry practices.

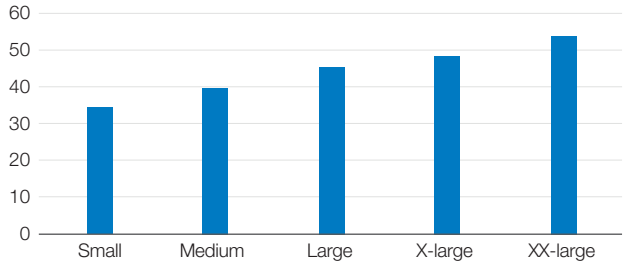
Priority actions

Manufacturers will continue to promote compliance with the Standards in on-farm QA Programs and company communications. Dairy Australia will promote compliance through extension and animal husbandry training in conjunction with the National Centre for Dairy Education and Regional Development Programs. The Standards have been reprinted for distribution to farmers.

Written animal care plans

- Nationally, 65% of farms have documented animal welfare requirements and 41% of respondents had detailed protocols for animal care practices.
- Respondents with larger herds were more likely to have written animal care plans.
- Approximately one quarter of respondents (23%) have both a copy of the Standards and a written animal care plan.

Figure 2 Percentage of respondents who reported having a written animal care plan by herd size.



Industry goal

All farmers have protocols and procedures for handling and management of dairy cattle, including calves.

Priority actions

The industry will continue training and extension in animal husbandry including initiatives in nutrition, mastitis control, reproductive management, farm risk management, calf management and rearing through the Regional Development Programs and education materials accessible via the Dairy Australia website.

Nutrition management

Nutrition management underpins the success of every dairy business. Australian dairy farmers are focused on managing feed quality and quantity throughout all seasons to keep their cows and other stock in optimal health and body condition and to maximise production.

Feed systems

- Providing dairy cows with the opportunity to graze paddocks and supplementing them with moderate to high levels of concentrates continues to be the feed system of choice on many dairy farms.
- Feed budgets are used by a very high proportion of farms milking more than 500 cows (75%) but there has been an overall decline since 2014 in the proportion of dairy farms using a documented feed budget – particularly for farms managing smaller herds.
- Large farms and farms feeding partial mixed rations or a hybrid system are the most likely to have a feed budget.

Figure 3 Feed systems used by farmers, by dairy region

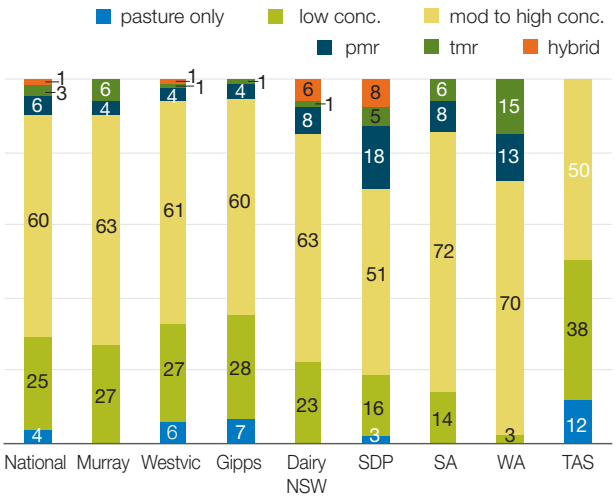
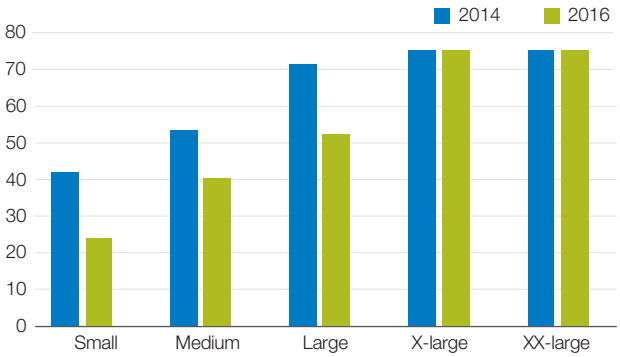


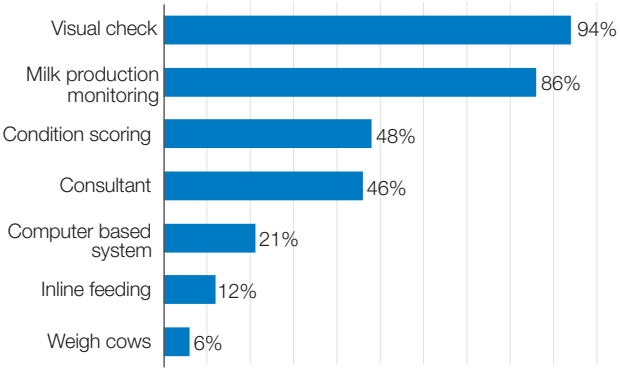
Figure 4 Percentage of respondents using a feed budget by herd size



Monitoring herd nutrition

- On average, farmers use three methods to monitor their herd nutrition program.
- Almost all farmers (94%) visually check their cows. The vast majority (86%) monitor milk production to determine whether the herd's nutrition program is adequate.
- Body condition scoring (48%) and use of consultants (46%) are reasonably common ways of monitoring herd nutrition.

Figure 5 Methods used by farmers to monitor herd nutrition (prompted).



Industry goal

All farmers regularly monitor the needs of their animals in relation to the quantity and quality of feed.

Stocking rates and/or feed supplementation are managed to maintain animals in appropriate body condition.

Priority action

Dairy Australia will continue to provide guidance on improved pasture production and feeding systems, including tools to assess feed availability and quality, and measures of body condition.

Cow management

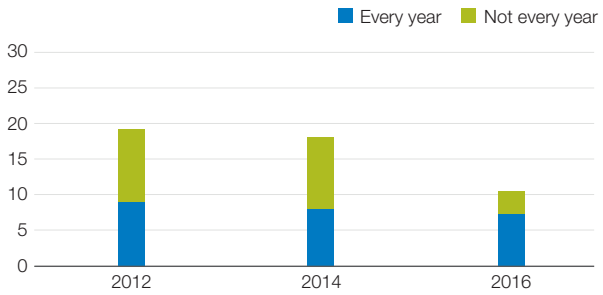
Australian dairy farmers recognise that to deliver safe, high quality dairy products, they must practise sound animal husbandry and keep their animals in optimal condition. In particular, the industry has identified five priority areas – calving induction, tail docking, lameness prevention, heat stress mitigation and down cow management – for on-going focus and has set specific goals for these areas.

Calving induction

The Australian dairy industry acknowledges community concerns and recognises the animal welfare issues associated with calving induction and is committed to phasing out the practice through improved herd management practices, tools and technology.

- There has been significant decline in the proportion of farms (now only 10%) using routine calving induction as a management tool.
- The number of farms who practice routine calving induction has halved since 2014.
- Most farmers only use calving induction on a small portion of their herd (<15%).
- Only 0.7% of the national herd has been induced over the past year.

Figure 6 Progress in the reduction of farmers using routine calving induction



Industry goals

The dairy industry does not support routine calving induction and will work to phase it out through improved herd management practices, tools and technologies.

Priority actions

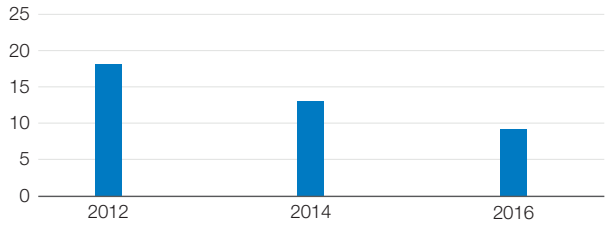
The dairy industry supports the implementation of the Australian Cattle Veterinarians guidelines on calving induction including the requirement for implementation of structured fertility management programs in herds where induction is proposed. Annual limits for routine calving induction are established for the proportion of cows that may be induced without a special exemption. Unplanned late inductions which provide no benefit to future seasonal fertility are to be discontinued. Dairy Australia will continue to provide farmers with information on improved reproductive management, through the InCalf program. This will reduce the need for induction. The industry is also investing in research on genetic improvement and practical solutions to achieve long term improvement in herd fertility.

Tail docking

The Australian dairy industry does not support tail docking unless it is to treat injury or disease. The new Standards only allow for tail docking to treat injury and only on veterinary advice. Tail docking of cattle is prohibited in some Australian states, except when undertaken by a veterinarian.

- Tail docking is becoming uncommon, falling significantly from 13% farms to 9% since 2014.
- The use of tail docking is more common on farms with large milking herds (301 to 500 cows).
- Two-thirds of farmers who are still docking tails are aware the practice will be banned when the Standards are legislated by the states.

Figure 7 Percentage of respondents who routinely dock tails



Industry goal

The dairy industry does not support tail docking. It should only be undertaken to treat injury or disease, and only under the recommendation of a vet.

Priority actions

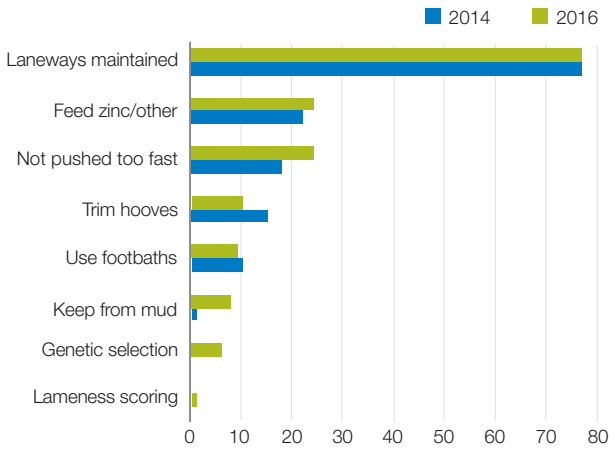
The dairy industry has supported legislation to ban tail docking under the Standards and continues to advise farmers of the requirements.

Lameness prevention

The dairy industry is working to minimise lameness through the adoption of practices to prevent, detect and treat cases on farms. Farmers recognise that prevention and prompt and effective treatment of lameness is good for production and welfare of their cows.

- Most farms have lameness prevention strategies in place (95%).
- Lameness strategies are undertaken on almost all dairy farms (95%).
- Laneway maintenance remains the predominant method to manage lameness (77%).
- Only 1% of farmers said they use lameness scoring as a means of preventing lameness in the herd.
- Since 2014, there has been an increase from 18% to 24% in the proportion of farmers mentioning not pushing their herd to walk too fast as a means of preventing lameness.

Figure 8 Popularity of different lameness strategies employed by farmers



Industry goal

All farmers have lameness prevention and treatment strategies in place.

Priority actions

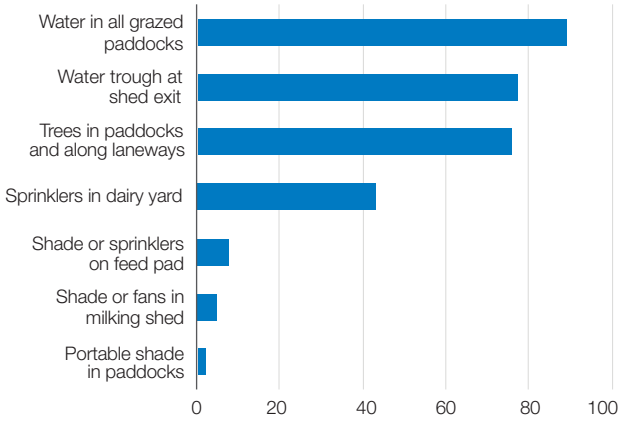
Dairy Australia will continue to work with service providers including vets and Regional Development Programs to ensure farmers have access to programs to manage lameness in dairy cows. The industry extension program Healthy Hooves promotes good practices to dairy farmers on the prevention, early detection and treatment of lameness.

Heat stress mitigation

Heat stress affects cow comfort, herd milk production and farm income. The impact of heat stress on cow fertility, health and welfare lasts well beyond seasonal hot weather. Dairy Australia's Cool Cows program provides farmers with tools and information on practices to minimise the risk of heat stress.

- Shade in paddocks remains the main way farmers keep cows cool (77%) compared to cooling infrastructure in the dairy yard or shed (45%).
- 89% of farms had water troughs in all paddocks that cows graze on.

Figure 9 Infrastructure mentioned by farmers used to keep cows cool



Industry goal

All farmers manage their herd to minimise the effects of heat stress.

Priority actions

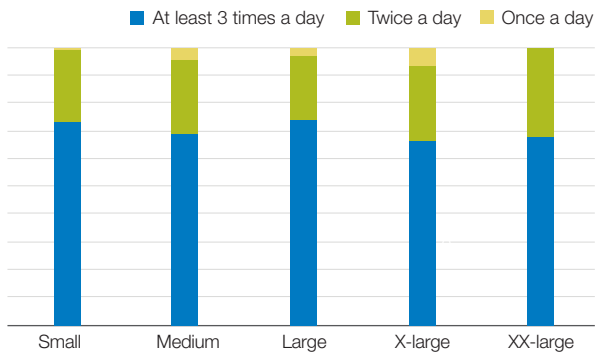
Dairy Australia will continue to support the Cool Cows project to provide farmers with advice and innovative tools for an integrated year-round approach to managing heat stress.

Down cow management

The term 'down cow' applies to any late pregnant or recently-calved cow that is lying down and unable to rise for 24 hours or more. The majority of farmers have a clearly defined approach to care for these animals.

- A larger proportion of dairy farmers check down cows at least every eight hours (69%) compared to 63% in 2014.
- Almost all respondents (94%) say that down cows are checked at least twice a day, and in most cases they are checked three times a day (69%).
- This year showed further improvement with more cows being nursed in dedicated areas (64% up from 53%).

Figure 10 Frequency of checking downer cow condition by herd size



Industry goal

All farmers ensure sick or injured cows are either treated, or humanely euthanised as soon as possible.

Priority action

Dairy Australia will continue to work with service providers and vets to ensure farmers have access to information on down cows, and support for their assessment and care. Workshops on the management and nursing of down cows are being provided by Regional Development Programs.

Calf management

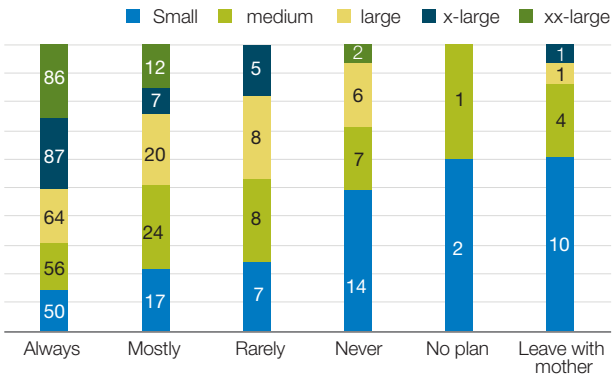
Calves are the most vulnerable animals on the dairy farm and must be managed with care.

The dairy industry is committed to ensuring all farmers adopt sound animal husbandry practices and management systems to deliver good animal welfare for calves, whether they are destined for the milking herd, reared for dairy beef, or marketed for veal.

Colostrum management

- The vast majority of dairy farms provided additional colostrum to most calves (81%).
- Large farms were the most diligent in providing additional colostrum to calves with 98% providing colostrum most of the time.
- Only 7% of farms never provided additional colostrum.

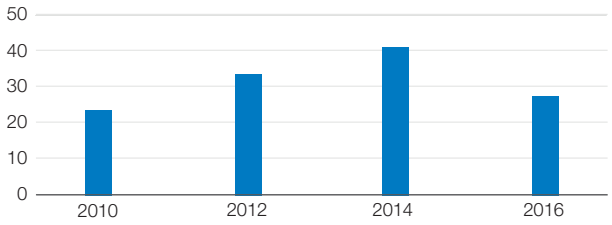
Figure 11 Farms providing additional colostrum to calves by herd size



Managing antibiotic residues in calves

- There has been significant improvement in managing antibiotic residues in calves, including a significant reduction since 2014 in the proportion of farmers administering antibiotics to sale calves, at 27% down from 41%.
- Those administering antibiotics to sale calves were extremely likely (98%) to have systems in place to manage withholding periods or cross contamination risks.
- Most commonly, farmers ensure equipment used to administer antibiotics to sale calves is clearly marked and kept separate (90%), and record treatment dates and withholding periods (87%).

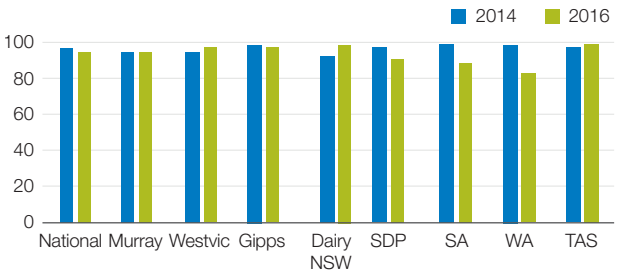
Figure 12 Percentage of farmers that treat sale calves with antibiotics, 2010–2016



Calf transport

- Almost all farms selling calves for slaughter ensure they are fed on farm within six hours of the start of transport (96%), with the average being two and a half hours.
- 77% of farmers transport all calves at a minimum age of five-days.
- There was a small increase in the farmers saying they had a sign at the gate or shed to advise transporters when the calves were fed (12% up from 10% in 2014).
- Overall fewer farmers (80%) mentioned they had a system in place to notify the last time calves were fed.

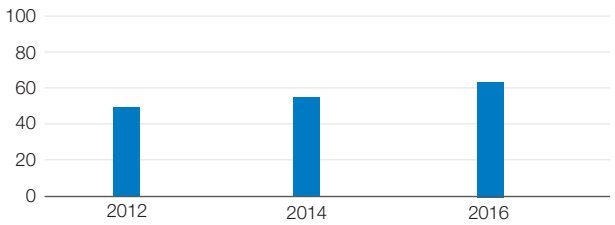
Figure 13 Comparison of 2014 and 2016 percentages of farmers that feed calves within six hours of transport, by dairy region



Calf disbudding

- Use of professional disbudding or dehorning services continues to trend upwards, now at 64% up from 57% in 2014.
- Farmers mention pain relief has been provided on some farms (23%) when disbudding or dehorning up to 6 months of age, but they may not be aware of pain relief provided by contractors disbudding calves.
- Farmers report that polled genetics are now being used exclusively on 9% of dairy farms.

Figure 14 Percentage of farmers using professional disbudding or dehorning services from 2012–2016

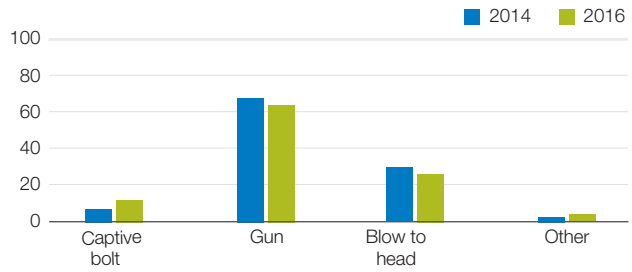


Calf euthanasia

The Standards only allow blunt force trauma to be used on calves less than 24 hours old and when no other means is reasonably available.

- There has been some improvement in this area, with the percentage of farmers using a captive bolt to euthanise calves nearly doubling from 2014, from 6% to 11%.
- Since 2014 there has been a slight decrease in farmers using blunt trauma to euthanise calves, now at 25% down from 29%.
- Nationally, 13% of farmers (or someone else from the farm) have attended a calf euthanasia course.

Figure 15 Comparison between 2014 and 2016 of most common methods for calf euthanasia



Industry goal

All farmers adhere to standards and agreed industry practices for the management of their calves.

All people handling and transporting calves for sale or slaughter adhere to animal welfare standards.

Priority action

Dairy Australia will continue to provide information to support farmers in caring for calves including the Healthy Calves program and training in humane euthanasia. The dairy industry will continue to work with other sectors involved in the care and transport of bobby calves to support systems that assist all parties to fulfil their animal welfare responsibilities. This work will be delivered in cooperation with the National Centre for Dairy Education, the National Meat Industry Training Advisory Council and Regional Development Programs through workshops and formal competencies for farmers, transporters and abattoir workers.

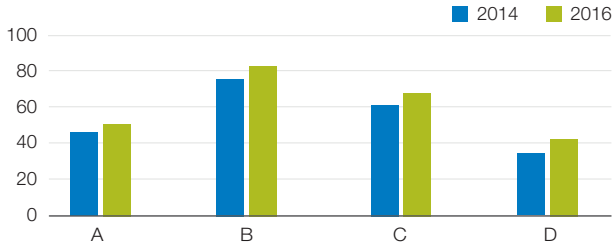
Disease management

More dairy farmers are recognising that biosecurity is essential to minimise the risk of disease spread in their herds. To this end, they institute a range of on-farm management practices that support good animal health and welfare outcomes. Survey results reveal that fewer dairy farmers are bringing in stock and the adoption of 'closed herds' helps to mitigate risk.

BJD risk managements

- Since 2014, there has been a significant rise in the proportion of farmers implementing all three steps of the 3-Step Calf Plan from 40% to 50%.
- In particular, improvements have been made in increasing the number of farms that rear calves away from adult stock effluent at all times.

Figure 16 Comparing 2014 to 2016 percentages of farmers following the 3-Step Calf Plan



A Remove calves being reared within 12 hours all the time

B Rear calves in area away from adult stock effluent all the time

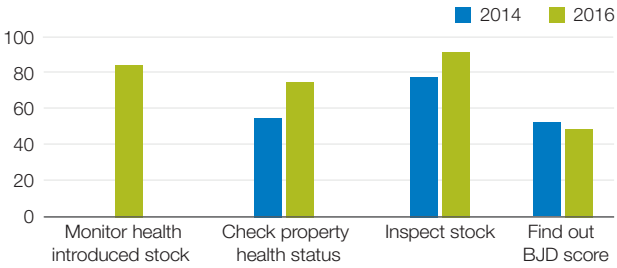
C Graze calves until they are 1 year old in separate paddocks all the time

D Follow 3 Step Calf Plan completely

Livestock purchased

- The number of closed herds has increased significantly since 2014, from 33% to 49%.
- The vast majority of farmers took steps to monitor the health status of introduced animals (84%).
- A relatively lower proportion of farmers found out the Dairy Score for BJD Assurance prior to introducing stock (48%)

Figure 17 Percentage of farmers taking steps to monitor health of introduced stock, and most common methods, comparison of 2014-16 figures.



Industry goal

All farmers adopt Biosecurity Plans to manage animal health risks for their herd.

Specifically for Bovine Johne's Disease the goal is to minimise contamination of farms and farm products by M. paratuberculosis, to protect non-infected herds whilst minimising disruption to trade, and to minimise social, economic and trade impact.

Priority action

Dairy Australia will continue to promote the importance of biosecurity measures in minimising the risk of introducing and spreading animal diseases, weeds and pests to dairy farms. This promotion will be supported by the development and delivery of a Farm Biosecurity planning tool. Early detection and investigation of suspect new diseases provides the best opportunity to minimise impact and losses to individual farmers and the wider industry. Dairy Australia will continue to work with vets and service providers to improve risk assessment and management advice on Bovine Johne's Disease and other endemic diseases including facial eczema, bovine pestivirus and mycoplasma infections. This information will be integrated into a practical tool for dairy farmers and their animal health advisers to develop customised Farm Biosecurity Plans for their enterprise.

The Australian dairy industry vision for animal welfare is that every dairy animal is well cared for. The industry Sustainability Framework goal is to "provide best care for all animals".





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0946 | Jun 2017