

On farm animal welfare assessment tool for dairy goats

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Dairy goat farms have experienced a strong process of intensification in Spain in the last decade, which, in many aspects, could compromise optimal animal welfare (AW). Good AW is a prerequisite for sound farm animal production. Animal Welfare assessment is one of the pillars of sustainable production systems; however, covering all AW-relevant aspects in a single assessment, including both 'resource' and 'animal-based' indicators, is challenging.

The objective of this work was to develop and implement an AW assessment tool for dairy goat systems in collaboration with relevant stakeholders in the sector. The study had three phases: i) first, we discussed with stakeholders the specific issues they found more relevant to cover in modern dairy goat farms plus a literature review of works that addressed similar objectives; ii) then a draft questionnaire was developed and discussed with stakeholders; and iii) finally a selection of farms was made to test the tool.

The stakeholders involved included veterinarians, nutritionists, breeders, and managers in the dairy goats sector. The questionnaire (Google Form) was organized into the four main domains considered in the Welfare Quality® protocol: good feeding, good housing, appropriate behavior, and good health, including respectively 19, 23, 14, and 3 specific questions. Most of them are answered using a 1-10 scoring system, with specific guidance for score allocation. Twelve farms using a representation of the main feeding systems were used to run an initial test of the tool. The results highlighted two critical concerns: early-life rearing to reduce neonatal mortality while improving growth rate and specific management of the primiparous vs. multiparous animals during lactation.

Acknowledgments: H2020-PATHWAYS project (101000395).