The ideal dairy farm: as described by a farmer, advisor and the general public

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When asked “What does the ideal dairy farm look like?” We all have a different picture in our minds, even a group of dairy farmers would all have a different idea. Some might picture a 3,000 cow freestall facility, others it might be a robotic facility and for some, they want a 60 cow tie stall, with lots of pasture. While the picture in our minds might be different, they likely share some similar details: financially stable, clean, incorporating new technology, efficient, incorporates ideal cow comfort, and somewhere in there is improved quality of life for the farmer (and the family).

If you were to ask this question to a group of lay citizens (people who self-identified as having no involvement in animal production) you would get some very different answers. For example, lay citizens frequently associate high standards of animal welfare with higher quality animal products and reject the use of chemicals, including antibiotics and hormones, for purposes of increasing production. Also, considerable evidence indicates that lay citizens expect farm animals to be well treated and to live a more natural life. Some accounts indicate that some lay citizens perceive farm animals to be living in conditions that are far from optimal.

Differences in concerns and opinions about similar issues on the topic of food animal production practices exist between different stakeholders, likely driven by diverging self-interests and values. Encouraging engagement among different stakeholders to identify similarities (and differences) in views and opinions is a viable vehicle to identify sustainable practices in animal. Considering the scarcity of (research based) knowledge regarding the attitudes of farmers and stakeholders who work directly with the dairy industry, and whether they are in agreement (or not) with lay citizens, a group of researchers set out to investigate the views of 3 different stakeholders. The aim of this study was to explore the shared and divergent views among dairy farmers, agricultural advisors, and lay citizens on what characteristics they viewed were most important on an ideal dairy farm, and their associated reasons.

Responses from 107 dairy farmers, 170 agricultural advisors, and 280 lay citizens were evaluated. Five themes were identified: milk quality, animal welfare, economics, society, and the environment. Although all 3 groups made reference to each of the 5 themes, they emphasized different characteristics. Lay citizens placed the most emphasis on milk quality. In contrast, both the farmers and the advisors highlighted economics as the most important characteristic of an ideal dairy farm. When considering only animal welfare differences in the use of the constructs of animal welfare were identified: farmers and advisors referred mostly to aspects related to biological functioning, whereas lay citizens emphasized affective states and naturalness. All 3 stakeholder groups referred to the use of pasture as being an important component of an ideal dairy farm but again differed in their reasons; citizens referred to pasture in the context of naturalness, whereas the other 2 stakeholder groups almost always referred to pasture using economic terms. Technology was highlighted by all 3 groups as an important characteristic of an ideal dairy farm but differences were noted in their justification for this view. For example, lay citizens viewed technology as a tool to improve milk quality, whereas farmers and advisors both referred to technology as an important vehicle to improve quality of life for those working in the industry. Lay citizens raised several concerns associated with the overuse of antibiotics and other chemicals, but farmers and advisors rarely mentioned these types of concerns. Farmers and advisors placed considerable emphasis on the quality of life of dairy farmers and workers, an issue rarely
discussed by lay citizens. Researchers concluded that, this study helped to highlight several disconnects between the expectations of the lay citizens, and farmers and their advisors.

What is my take away? At the end of the day, the farmer, the advisor and the lay citizen who is purchasing milk at price chopper have some similar ideas. Consumers are worried about milk quality, is this product safe to drink? Dairy farmers and advisors have a strong focus to produce the highest quality product. While consumers highlight a concern about antibiotics, dairy farmers and advisors are focusing on cow comfort, technology and best management practice to reduce the need to use antibiotics. At the end of the day, take the time to listen to concern, likely there concerns, are similar to your concerns, but you are already being proactive.

No, consumers don’t often think about the economic side of a dairy farm, but how often do you think about a teacher’s budget, your neighbors budget or your sister in law’s spending habits? Likely not very often, it’s not your responsibility (or your business). Some lay citizens do become very interested in the economic side if they have an interest in finances or business management, but most are not interested. That’s ok, they are more interested in animal wellbeing, what are you doing to take care of your animals, and the quality of the end product, milk they can purchase at the grocery store.