

Cows eat grass, don't they?

UK SUMMARY

www.docowseatgrass.org

The 'Cows eat grass, don't they?' project ran from 2018-2021 and looked at industry and farmer views of grass-based, higher-feed-input and indoor dairy systems in the UK and Ireland. The UK research involved a survey with 254 dairy farmers in Scotland, analysis of 38 documents, interviews with 25 UK key stakeholders (from government, industry, charities, research) and 21 GB dairy farmers.

UK findings:

- **Dominant industry view: differences between grass-based or indoor systems don't matter** for economic, animal welfare and environmental outcomes, but management is more important.
- **Grazing matters for some**
68% of Scottish dairy farmer respondents to a survey agreed or strongly agreed that cows should graze, and 51% agreed or strongly agreed that animal welfare was better if cows grazed.
- **Why grazing matters: farmers enjoy working with cows outside**
If farmers had a preference for cows to graze, this was usually based on enjoying working with cows outside on their own farm and did not necessarily equate to negative views about indoor dairy farming.
- **'Grass-based' isn't one thing.** 'Grass-based' included farmers whose system was built around maximising milk from grazed grass, using fertiliser inputs; farmers who grazed but also used bought in feed to maximise milk yields; and extensive, low input grass-based farmers. These groups had different networks, practices, beliefs and sometimes supply chains.
- **Grass-fed labels: industry stakeholders sceptical, farmers more positive**
Many mainstream dairy stakeholder interviewees saw grass-fed labels as potentially divisive and making false claims about the benefits of grazing. Farmers I interviewed generally had more pragmatic views and saw them as a market opportunity.

Recommendation for industry:

Embrace diversity without division. The idea that 'systems differences don't matter' is inclusive of all types of dairy systems. But it ignores the ways in which systems differences *do* matter to farmers and others. Allow parts of the sector to champion their point of differentiation without that being interpreted as leading to division.

Recommendation for charities/Non-governmental organisations:

Indoor ≠ industrial. Calling indoor dairy farming 'factory' or 'industrial' farming is too simplistic. While the role of grass and grazing are important in discussions about the environment, animal welfare and a good working life for farmers, language or claims that create a binary between grass-based and indoor systems can ignore complexity on the ground.

Recommendation for government:

How grazing is done matters. If there is going to be public money for public goods for grazing practices this needs to consider how grazing is done to achieve sustainability outcomes, as 'grass-based' is not a homogeneous category in the UK in terms of nutrient management and use of inputs. Advisory support may be needed to achieve outcomes.