

Farmers' perceptions on parameters defining suckler cow efficiency

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Most beef cattle breeding programs focus on traits related to calving ease and calf growth during lactation and fattening, selected because of their economic importance, easy measurement and adequate heritability to allow for genetic improvement via classical breeding programs. Other traits can also play a major role on cow lifetime productivity, such as number of weaned calves or cumulative weaning weight, but they have low heritability and long generation intervals. In the context of a survey that analysed the efficiency and resilience of suckler cattle farming systems in Spanish mountain areas (GenTORE H2020), farmers were asked to score the relative importance (1-not important to 5-very important) of several traits in order to define the efficiency of their cows: age at first calving, calving ease, fertility, cumulative number of weaned calves, calf weight at birth, at 90 days and at weaning, calf carcass conformation, cow size, cow udder conformation, feet and legs morphology, docility and use of low quality feedstuffs. We also asked if they actually registered these traits, and if they provided the information to any breeder association. Preliminary results indicate that despite 67% of the farmers belonged to breeder associations, only 14% of them delivered data for their breeding programmes. In fact, data were registered by relatively few farmers (age at first calving by 48%, fertility and calf birth weight by 29%, calving ease by 24%, calf weaning weight by 19%), mainly in large farms (>100 cows) and those that fattened their calves. However, most of these traits were considered important or very important to determine cow efficiency, with the highest scores given to calving ease (4.9), fertility (4.8), and docility and cumulative number of weaned calves (4.3). Calf conformation (4.1) and adult udder (4.1) and leg conformation (4.0) were also considered important. Surprisingly, calf weight traits were scored lower (3.9 at birth, 3.2 at 90 days, 3.7 at weaning), and the less important trait was cow size (2.8). At this stage, some trends were found between scores given by farmers with different farm size (below vs over 100 cows), predominant cow breed (autochthonous vs specialized beef breed) and type of marketed product (weaned vs fattened calf).

Book of Abstracts of the 69th Annual Meeting of the European Federation of Animal Science

Dubrovnik, Croatia, 27th – 31st August, 2018



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EAN: 9789086863235
e-EAN: 9789086868711
ISBN: 978-90-8686-323-5
e-ISBN: 978-90-8686-871-1
DOI: 10.3920/978-90-8686-871-1

ISSN 1382-6077

First published, 2018

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The Netherlands, 2018



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