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Dairy cattle and bobby calves

There are more than 1.6 million dairy cows in Australia currently. Unlike intensive production systems overseas, most Australian dairy cows generally spend most of their day on pasture. However, there are several welfare issues that affect both cows and calves in dairy production.



The issue

The key animal welfare issues in dairy production relate to bobby calves, cow-calf separation and painful procedures or conditions.

In order to produce milk, cows must give birth to a calf. Male calves are generally considered a low-value waste product by the industry and are usually slaughtered at five days of age. The RSPCA is concerned about the potential for poor treatment of these 'bobby calves' on farm, during transport and at slaughter.

Calves are separated from their mothers within 24 hours of birth, mainly to reduce the risk of disease in the calf and to ensure the calf is fed adequate colostrum. Cow-calf separation is a practice which is stressful for both cow and calf.

In addition, the removal of horns from calves without pain relief or anaesthetic, lameness and mastitis in cows, and the live export of dairy cattle for breeding purposes, all pose animal welfare concerns.

For dairy cows to have a good life, they need to be healthy and well fed, be protected from weather extremes, have access to pasture, be free of lameness and mastitis, and not be subjected to painful procedures without anaesthetic or pain relief. They need the opportunity to express important natural behaviours and do things they enjoy.

What needs to change

By increasing the value of bobby calves and providing an alternative market, there is real potential to improve their welfare. Raising excess dairy calves for veal is one way to increase the value and quality of life for an animal that would otherwise be destined for slaughter at five days old.

For example, through the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme standards for dairy veal calves, the RSPCA encourages farmers to raise calves in a way that gives them a life worth living and gives consumers the confidence to buy humanely farmed veal. [Find out more about what RSPCA Approved means for dairy calves.](#)

The dairy industry must look at ways to avoid the distress caused by separating the calf from the cow, and allow cows and calves to maintain some form of contact and expression of natural behaviours.

The RSPCA is also particularly concerned about the welfare of dairy cattle exported overseas for breeding and production. We continue to call for breeding animals to be protected under the Exporter Supply Chain Assurance System (ESCAS), which currently only applies to animals exported for slaughter, to protect their welfare during export and after arrival.

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