The Suffering Of Farmed Cattle

The size of the total cattle herd in the UK - including both dairy and beef animals - was about 10.4 million in 2003. Of these, 2.2 million were adult dairy cows.

In order to produce commercial quantities of milk, dairy cows are forced to endure a constant cycle of pregnancies. Lactation does not occur unless this cycle is perpetuated. Calves are usually removed from their mothers within 24 hours of birth, after suckling their mother’s first antibody-rich milk, known as colostrum. Separation of mother and infant causes acute anxiety and suffering for both animals.

Before the BSE crisis, half a million baby calves were transported on marathon journeys to continental European veal crates – a trade the dairy industry is keen to resume. In more recent times, the youngsters were killed and destroyed under the “calf processing scheme” and a subsidy paid to the producer. The CPS is now defunct but because there remains a reduced demand for British beef most dairy calves (without much meat on their bones) are considered a waste by-product and are killed within a week or two for baby food, or for cheese and pie ingredients. Other offspring join beef herds, will follow their mothers and become dairy animals themselves - or are reported to be shot and buried in the vicinity of the farm.

Milk-producing Machines

Dairy cows in the UK are typically black and white Holstein/Friesians, genetically selected to provide maximum milk yields. In an unfettered state, a cow will feed her calf for approximately six to eight months. Milk is secreted at a maximum rate of about eight to ten litres per day, which the calf suckles on four to six occasions. The mother produces less than 1,000 litres throughout the duration of her lactation, storing approximately two litres in her udders at any one time.

In modern dairy farming, cows can be expected to produce between 6,000 and 12,000 litres during their 10 month lactation. This means she may be carrying in excess of 20 litres at any one time – ten times as much as would be required for her calf. (Webster Animal Welfare – A Cool Eye Towards Eden 1995 p169 - 170).

The average lifespan of modern dairy cows is only about five years. Naturally, they live to an age of 25-30 years.

Exploitation Of The Reproductive System

The most common technique used to impregnate dairy cows is artificial insemination (AI). But, increasingly, powerful hormones are being used to force high quality cows to produce large numbers of embryos, which are surgically removed and inserted into lower grade females who then bring the calves to term.

Housing

Dairy cows are usually kept outside on pasture for the duration of the summer months. For the remainder of the year they are kept indoors, typically in concrete cubicle houses. Each cow has a cubicle to stand or lie in, which should have straw or wood shavings provided. Behind each animal a passageway collects urine and faeces, requiring cleaning twice daily. Accumulated waste is stored in huge slurry lagoons, later to be spread on the land.

Many cubicles still in use were designed decades ago and have become too small for the modern, larger animal. This has compounded welfare problems, resulting in cows standing in the dunging passageway. It also has major health implications.
Lameness

Around 20% of British dairy cows are lame at any one time. In fact, inspections of the feet of cull cows at slaughter reveal evidence of past or present foot damage in nearly all animals. Lameness is caused by a number of factors. These include the quantity of bedding available, the move towards cubicle housing and the now near universal practice of feeding animals wet, fermented grass (known as silage), rather than dry hay. Silage produces wet faeces and acidic slurry in the dunging passageway, which eventually softens the feet and causes infection.

Also implicated in lameness is the reliance on concentrated feed supplements, which are difficult for these slow-digesting ruminants to cope with. The result is the release of inflammatory substances into the bloodstream, which lead to a condition known as laminitis, an acutely painful foot disorder.

Another important reason for dairy cow lameness is the vast size and weight of the modern animal’s udder. It is so large and distended that most cows simply cannot stand or walk properly.

Mastitis

Dairy cows are prone to infection of the udder caused by bacteria and other environmental pathogens entering via the teat canal. This acutely painful condition is known as mastitis. Incidence varies from between 30 to more than 60 cases in every 100 cows during a year.

Milk Fever And Other Diseases

About 5%-8% of cows suffer from the condition known as “milk fever”. This is caused by the sudden depletion of calcium reserves each year from the heavy burden of calf-birth and lactation.

Many also get “grass staggers” from lack of magnesium in the diet. General depletion of nutrients caused by increasing intensification also triggers cases of brucellosis and viral infections and susceptibility to salmonella bacteria.

Most cows are spent by the age of four or five – though a great many are played out younger than that due to the increasing incidence of stress-related infertility and lameness. Because of the BSE crisis, no cattle older than 30 months are permitted to go into the human food chain. Instead, they are killed and burned and their remains stored in giant warehouses around the country.

Beef Cattle

There were nearly 1.7 million adult beef cows in the UK in 2003. As well as suckling their own calves, around 70% of youngsters born to dairy animals are also raised within beef herds. From the beef farmer’s point of view, the heavier and “beefier” his calves the better. Specialist companies dealing in bull semen for artificial insemination (AI) provide the means to achieve this.

The most popular breed chosen to provide semen is the Belgian Blue. This animal carries a recessive gene for “double muscling”, so-called because of the enormous muscles, particularly on the hindquarters. Belgian Blue stud bulls have to be born via Caesarean section because their sheer size makes natural delivery impossible.

Mutilations Performed On Cattle

Male calves reared for beef are often castrated, despite being slaughtered before they reach sexual maturity. Methods commonly used include surgical castration, tight rubber rings that restrict blood flow, and appliances that crush the spermatic cord of each testis – the so-called “bloodless castrator”.

Both dairy cows and beef cattle are de-horned - a painful procedure - to prevent animals injuring each other. Horns contain both blood circulation and nerve endings, and so local anaesthesia and cauterisation are necessary to stem bleeding. If horns have already developed, they are removed with saws, horn shears or cutting wire.

Young animals whose horns are not established can be disbudded. A hot iron is applied to the
horn-forming tissue when the calf is 4-6 weeks old, permanently preventing growth.

**E. Coli And Filthy Abattoirs**

The BSE crisis was followed in the winter of 1996/97 by a serious outbreak of food poisoning created by meat infected with E. coli 0157 bacteria. Twenty people died in a series of outbreaks in Scotland.

E. coli 0157 is a relatively new organism, first identified in 1982, and is an example of how the routine use of antibiotics in meat production is developing increasingly dangerous pathogens that are resistant to conventional drug treatment.

Publication of a report compiled by seven inspectors for the Meat Hygiene Service in March 1997 (it was actually completed in December 1995, but suppressed by government) has shown how potentially fatal organisms such as E coli enter slaughterhouses on the skins of infected animals and how procedures within abattoirs are likely to result in pathogens spreading to other animals and eventually to the consumer.

The Report showed that workers on cattle slaughter lines often used “dirty knives”, and the same hands to touch both hides and meat without washing. It criticised “poor access to sinks and sterilisers”.

Worse criticism was reserved for the system used for cutting up carcasses: “The action of plant staff, when contamination occurs is often incorrect. Major faecal contamination on the carcass, due to poor dressing practices, is a serious cause for concern.”

This condemnation of British abattoirs is one in a long line of reports. In 1986, EEC inspectors found a “frightening picture of poor hygiene, slapdash organisation and blood and gore all over the floor”, whilst at the beginning of the ‘90s, nine out of ten of the nation’s 900 slaughterhouses fell below the standard set down by EU inspectors.

**Subsidies**

Of cattle farmers’ total income of £2088 million in 2003, £928 million came by way of subsidies from the taxpayer.

**Live Transport**

Current EU rules allow cattle to travel for 14 hours without a rest or water. They must have a rest period of at least one hour after a 14 hour journey, after which, they may be transported for a further 14 hours. If the destination can be reached within another 2 hours then they may go a full 16 hours. After the second 14 hour journey, if the destination has not been reached the cattle must be unloaded, given food and water and rested for 24 hours. The journey times can then be repeated and this pattern can be repeated infinitely.

At the end of March (2004), the European Parliament voted to impose a 9 hour maximum overall journey limit for animals travelling to slaughter. Before this can become law the measure requires the approval of the Commission and the Agricultural Council of Ministers. A final decision has been deferred until 2011.

While a maximum journey length of 9 hours will be a considerable improvement on current legislation, it is still a long time to be spent in a confined space with no room to turn around, lie down and without access to water.