BATTERY COWS

Zero grazing and the dairy industry

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The industry-promoted image of Daisy amongst the buttercups has long been bogus but now dairy farming has reached a critical new juncture with the arrival of the almost permanently-confined battery cow.

Her fate is to eke out a short existence inside a large shed, shared with hundreds of other cows. Each has a narrow metal-barred stall. They are moved two or three times a day to the automated milking unit. Some operations also have covered 'loafing' yards. It is the cow equivalent of battery hen production – a system now widely recognised as being inhumane. Between 4 and 10 per cent of the national dairy herd is subjected to this regime.[1,2]

Animal Aid has investigated and conducted secret filming at four such 'zero grazing' units. We found animals crowded together in the gloom, and evidence of emaciation and disease. At one farm, two cows and a young calf had been shot dead and dumped outside.

Most people are unaware of the fundamentals of dairy farming – that cows must give birth to produce milk and that the majority of the resulting calves, especially the males, are regarded as a disposable inconvenience. A herdsman we spoke to described seeing a newly-born calf being shot in the head while he was still suckling at his mother's teat (see page 5). Thousands are shot every year when just days old. Others are killed in slaughter-houses for meat products, or they are consigned to oppressive veal units.

The central aim of dairy farmers is to maximise milk yield, while driving down costs. Toward these ends, cows have long been selectively bred and fed special high protein diets. A modern Holstein cow now produces up to 60 litres of milk per day.

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As the process has become more and more mechanised, the animals have become increasingly prone to stress-related diseases such as mastitis, lameness, scours, laminitis, TB and early infertility. The zero grazing phenomenon is another step towards the complete objectification of 'dairy animals' and their offspring. It is a regime that exploits to the maximum a cow's reproductive and milk-producing capacity while disposing of the calf she carried for nine months – the 'waste by-product' – with zero sentiment.

Because cows are sentient beings, rather than objects, their bodies rapidly break down under such pressure. After bearing four offspring in quick succession, they are likely to be lame, infertile or suffering from some other ailment that renders them unproductive and ready for slaughter.

The farming industry currently faces a bovine TB epidemic, for which it blames badgers. Before TB hit the headlines, cattle were afflicted by out-breaks of BSE and foot and mouth disease, which resulted in the brutal destruction of millions of animals. Battery cow units, in which large numbers of stressed, over-worked, selectively bred cows are confined in dank conditions, will lead inevitably to more disease and more animal suffering.

A Norfolk Herdsman's Account

'We had about 400 cows. There were three of us full-time, plus one relief. That was to do all the mucking out and feeding and milking and whatever else. We milked them every 12 hours – before dawn and early afternoon. They were divided up into high yield – this lot got a special food ration – mids and lows. The low yielding cows would go out for weeks if it was summer. The highs never went out. Around 40 to 50 per cent of the

Eyewitness Account

'Walking round the farm, I saw that a cow had fallen on the slippery surface of the milking yard. Her legs were splayed out and she couldn't stand up. She was in terrible pain. I quickly found X and told him. He replied: "Oh god, not another one. We've already got one waiting to be shot." The cow was harnessed, winched off the ground by the straps and taken to a field where she was dumped. X wanted the yard clear for milking.'

herd never got out at any time during the year. The game is to get the cow in calf again as soon as possible. In their "dry period", drugs like Orbeseal are squirted directly into the teat. I've worked in regular dairy operations, too, and the thing you notice with zero grazing is how depressed and uptight the cows are. The eyes are dull. In the summer, when the humidity's high in the sheds, they can hardly breathe. They have access to a concrete loafing yard but even on hot days they wouldn't use it till the evening – maybe because the ground was too hot for them. And with the high yields, especially – what with the pressure they're under – their muck was very liquid, a stream of liquid.

'The bull stays with the low yielding group. He gets out of condition pretty quickly, because he gets too much feed. He's off his feet, lame, in about three years, and then it's off to slaughter.

'The cows have a 21-day cycle. We'll AI [artificially inseminate] them at first and use the bull if they don't get pregnant. We'll try that three or four times and if she doesn't get in calf, she'll be milked till the end of her lactation and sent for slaughter. You'll get an average of four or five lactations before they're played out. There'll be a lot of mastitis and lameness. They get drugs for mastitis – injected into their udders. And they're wormed, and should be tested for TB, too.

'Cows were put down pretty regularly. I'd say about one a month. Sometimes it was because they fell in the slippery yard on the way to the milking parlour. They would do the splits – their legs paddling behind them. They'd damage or break their pelvis and the tendons and ligaments would go. There was no need for that – it was poor yard maintenance.

'And, of course, the male calves have a short time of it. If they were a pure dairy breed, as opposed to a beef/dairy cross, they had no value. They'd be taken to another farm owned by the same business for collection by the slaughter lorry. They wouldn't even get the mother's first milk – the colostrum. That would go to a female who might be a replacement milker.

'On traditional set-ups, cows are kept in all winter but this is the winter routine all year round. It's becoming more common but I think it's too much on the cow.'

(X worked at a zero grazing unit for three years. Angry at the way cows were treated under this regime, he finally left in 2003. He now works at an extensive dairy farm and has decided to speak out against the trend towards intensification of the dairy industry.)

Zero Grazing and Welfare

In general, dairy cows suffer from a high level of illness and disease but in zero grazing systems, the problems intensify. The limited space available in such systems restricts the ability of cows to avoid one another and tends to heighten the levels of direct aggression.[3] Permanently confined cows also suffer from increased levels of:

- Lameness: all housing is potentially bad for cows' feet and so year-round housing inevitably raises that risk.
- Mastitis: a painful infection which afflicts around 30 per cent of all cows, but particularly high-yielders.
- Infertility: selective breeding of cows for higher yield increases infertility.
- Acidosis and laminitis are common in zero grazing systems due to the increased proportion of concentrates in the diet.

Any infection (including the respiratory disease rhinotracheitis) can be passed quickly around the dairy herd. According to Genus Breeding – a company specialising in bovine reproduction – such problems 'can be made worse in herds with high density or zero grazing.'[4]

Mastitis

Mastitis is common among all dairy cows. A 2007 study by veterinary scientists in England and Wales found an average incidence of clinical mastitis of 71 cases per 100 cows.[5]

Lameness

There is a large amount of research documenting the various ways in which housing causes or exacerbates lameness. A 2006 Scottish Agricultural College study found that permanent housing of dairy cows in the UK increases lameness.[1] Housing on concrete flooring distorts the shape of the cow's hoof and leads to higher levels of digital dermatitis.[6] In addition, foot problems are associated with other diseases known to be related to high-yielding cows such as reduced fertility, milk fever, mastitis and laminitis.[7]

Infertility

Dairy cows are inseminated again just 60 days after giving birth. Reducing the time between pregnancies maximises the milk yield in the short term. But physiological exhaustion, stress and loss of body condition decrease the likelihood that cows will conceive rapidly after calving. Infertility is one of the main reasons why dairy cows are considered 'spent' and are prematurely culled.

Artificial Insemination (AI)

In order to produce milk, cows must first be made pregnant but the drive for maximum milk yield (and therefore maximum profits) leaves no room for nature to take its course. Most dairy cows are inseminated artificially. AI is an invasive technique, which involves inserting a catheter containing the thawed semen through the vagina into the cervix, while a gloved hand in the rectum aids the procedure. Despite being a complex and delicate procedure, it does not have to be carried out by a vet, although training and certification is necessary. Clearly, there is a possibility for serious internal

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injury to the cow if the operator is incompetent or careless. If a cow does not conceive first time, dairy farmers typically try two or three times (or more for an 'outstanding' cow). Cows in intensive dairy units may have just 4-5 lactations before they are spent but, according to one dairy worker, 'some go off a lot sooner than that'.

Embryo Transfer

To further increase productivity, high yielding cows are injected with hormones that stimulate the release of more than one egg. The cows are then inseminated and the embryos 'flushed out' by inserting a catheter into the uterus. The embryos are either implanted into other 'surrogate' cows who have been hormonally treated to adjust the timing of their oestrous cycle, or they can be frozen and stored for later use or sale. Pawton Dairy – a zero grazing operation in Cornwall – increases its profits by 'flushing a nucleus of 60 cows every six weeks' and selling the embryos.[8]

Surplus to Requirements

Farmers have a constant need for young females to replace the spent dairy cows. They are therefore likely to inseminate the majority of their cows with sperm from a pure dairy breed bull. If the resulting calf is male, he will probably be shot or slaughtered, since he will not grow up 'meaty' enough to warrant the cost of fattening him. If the calf is a female, however, the hope is that she will make a suitable 'follow-on' milker.
The alternative strategy for the farmer is to impregnate a dairy cow with semen from a specialist 'beef breed'. The resulting calves can be fattened for meat products and will go to a 'beef suckling' herd.
A typical zero grazed farm that we investigated removes calves from their mothers within hours of birth – a distressing separation for both mother and calf. The young are taken to a separate shed where the females are bottle- or bucket-fed colostrum. The males may not be fed at all before being shot or sent to the nearest slaughterhouse.

Market

When productivity wanes, spent or 'cull' cows will be slaughtered, or bartered at a livestock market. Invariably, they are bought by 'knackermen' and sent for slaughter. Cows do not travel happily and at market are unlikely to be given water to drink. A lack of straw underfoot makes the going slippery. This, coupled with some steep ramps, regularly causes animals to fall.
Pregnant cows or those with a calf at foot may still be traded through the market ring. Electric goads and wooden sticks continue to be used to move the frightened, lame and exhausted along. RSPCA officers are allowed into markets only by permission. Any who rock the boat may be refused entry in the future. It is much easier to turn a blind eye to all but the very worst suffering, or simply hand over any problems to a local authority Trading Standards Officer.

Eyewitness Account

'When I got to the farm, I could see that a cow had just calved. The young calf was just a few hours old and was suckling. I stood watching and smiling. There is no more beautiful sight. The farmer came over and – I thought – tousled his ear. But there was a gun in his other hand and he put it to the calf's head. When the shot fired, the mother jumped and ran. The calf went down kicking but he didn't die outright. He was dragged away, still kicking as the milk spilled from his mouth.'

There is overwhelming agreement amongst market workers that cull cows suffer. A prospective buyer, hoping to rescue two cows to graze his land, was advised against the purchase and told that lameness, udder problems and exhaustion leave the animals 'cream crackered' – slang for knackered.

Tricks of the Trade

Cull cows may be sent to market with over-full udders. Even though this is uncomfortable, it adds to the weight of the cow and brings a higher price. One vet stated that cows used to be given lots of salt water to drink before market to increase their weight. Only cows who walk with their legs splayed wide might be treated as 'overstocked'. Those whose udders are dripping milk are largely ignored.

Slaughter

Dairy cows are killed at the end of their useful lives. Diseases and conditions caused or exacerbated by intensive practices are the most common reasons given for killing them prematurely. A 2002 report found that 27 per cent of dairy cows are 'culled' because of mastitis, 27 per cent because of infertility, 16 per cent because of lameness, 19 per cent because of loss of productivity and 6 per cent because of disease.[9] In the slaughterhouse, cows are stunned with a captive-bolt pistol, are hoisted by one leg and have their throats cut. Not all are stunned adequately and conscious animals will bleed to death hanging by a hind leg.

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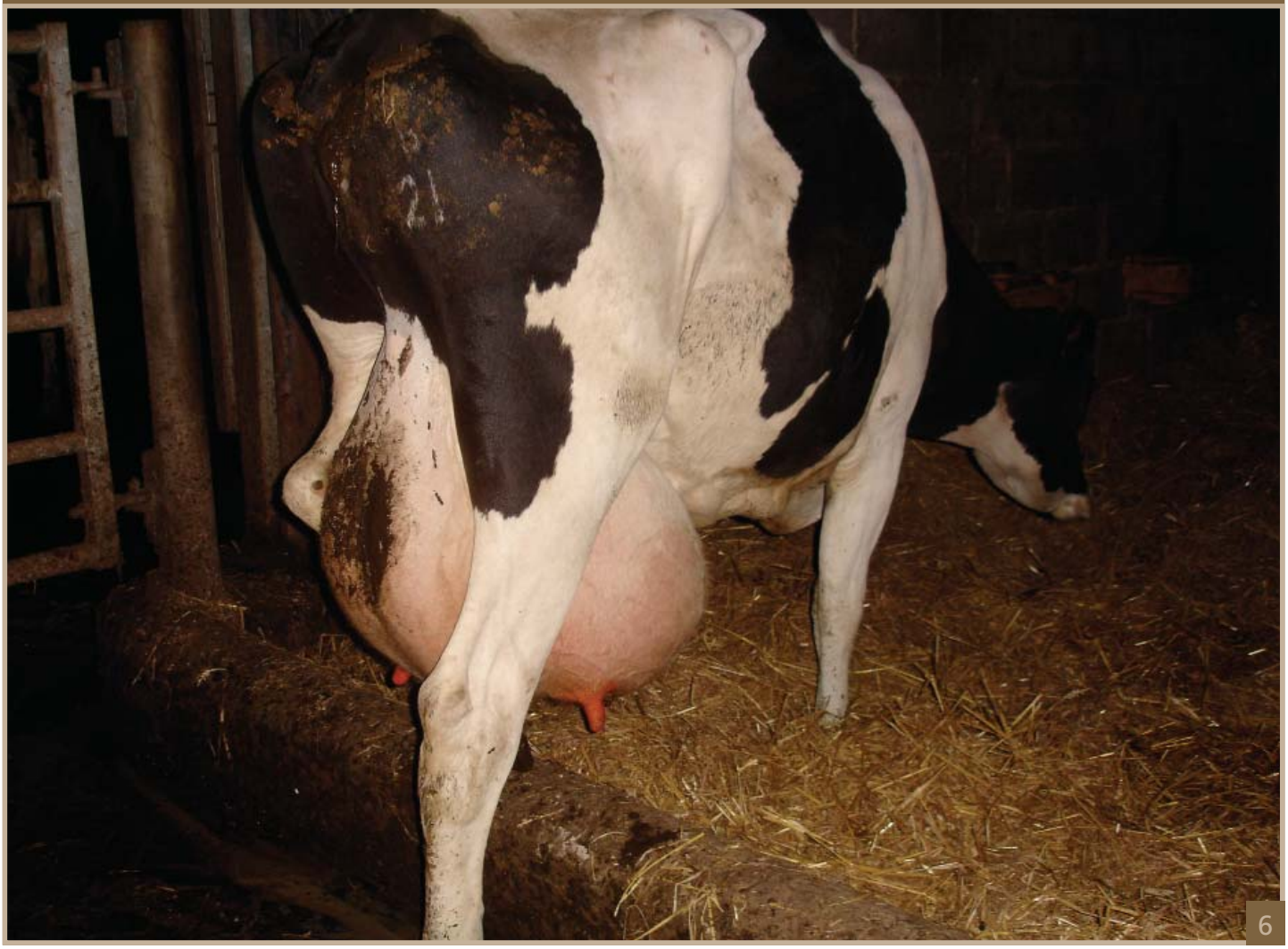

Statistics

- In 2001, around 2 per cent of UK farms were 'zero grazing' and a further 2 per cent kept their spring-calving cows in during the whole summer as well as the winter, while the other cows went out onto pasture.[1]

- The Scottish Agricultural College study, published in 2006, found that permanent housing of dairy cows in the UK seems to increase lameness. Of their sample of farms (the farms and farmers were self-selected, and so the least responsible farmers could have been excluded), the study found that 39 per cent of the zero grazing cows were lame, compared with 15 per cent of the cows on grazing farms. The scientists concluded: 'The results indicate that housing cows throughout the year potentially has a detrimental effect on foot and leg health.'[1]

- A study by Bristol University Veterinary Department, reported in the *Veterinary Record* in 2003[10], found that in the worst farms (i.e. the 20 per cent of farms that the scientists scored lowest for welfare):

  - 33-61 per cent of the cows were classified as 'thin' (i.e. too thin for good health)
  - 25-47 per cent of the cows had a bloated rumen
  - Up to 40 per cent of calvings were difficult
  - Only 28 per cent to 47 per cent of cows conceived after service (indicating either incompetence on the part of the inseminators or exhaustion and poor body condition of the cows, or both)
  - There were between 47 and 120 cases of mastitis per 100 cows in a year
  - Up to half the cows were observed to be moderately or severely lame
  - Between 70 and 97 per cent of cows had swollen hocks
  - Between 29 and 50 per cent had ulcerated hocks
  - Up to 78 per cent of cows had 'severe difficulty' in standing up when they had been lying down, suggesting they were suffering from considerable limb pain

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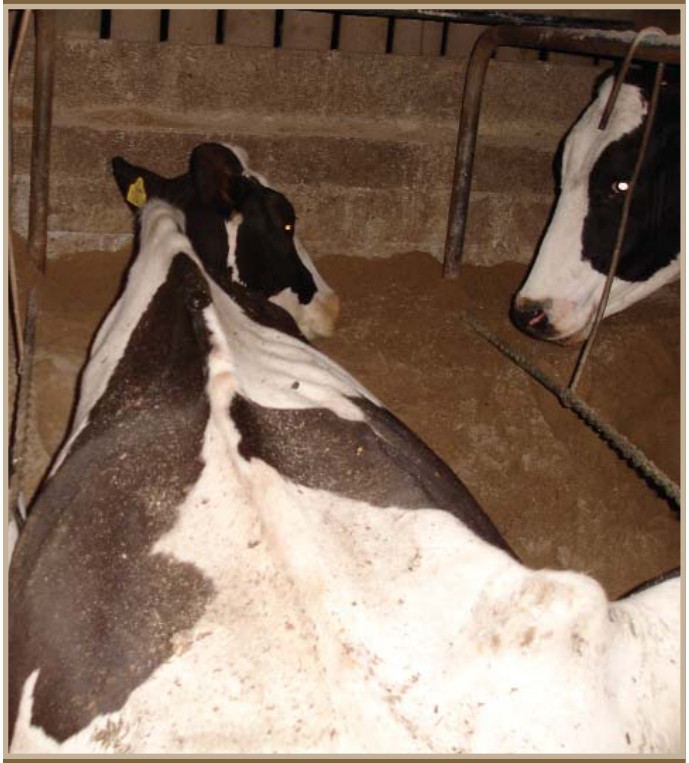

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Eyewitness Account

'I arrived at the farm to see a cow laying on her side, giving birth. It was a slow process – too slow for the farmer. He crept round the back of the silage feeder and attached a rope to it. He tied the other end to the calf's leg that was sticking out of her mother. With that, the cow felt something, got spooked and jumped up. As she ran, the rope tautened and the calf was yanked from her womb. I have never heard a scream like it – her mouth just fell open and she screamed and screamed.'

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Conclusion

For many years, the reproductive and milk-giving capacity of cows has been ruthlessly exploited through selective breeding, the use of drugs and even surgical interventions. The development of the 'battery cow' takes the exploitation to an alarming new level. It is vital that opinion-formers and the general public are alerted to the multiple problems that flow from treating cows and their calves in this way.

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