PRESS RELEASE

26th IFCN Dairy Conference 2025

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FUTURE DAIRY FARMING SYSTEMS: RESILIENCE AS A PATH TO SUSTAINABILITY

The International Farm Comparison Network (IFCN) had invited its dairy researchers from all around the world to its 26th annual Dairy Conference in The Netherlands. This year's conference was focused on the subject "Future dairy farming systems: Resilience as a path to sustainability". The event was held in Leeuwarden, a key hub for dairy innovation and research that plays a central role in advancing sustainable and efficient dairy farming practices. The event took place from May 19th to 23rd, 2025 with more than 60 dairy researchers from all around the world.

IFCN Summary results

Aebe Alberts, Manager of Dairy Campus, welcomed the participants to the Dairy Campus and emphasized the growing importance of data in dairy farming, stating that "Data is key and sometimes even more important than milking cows."

IFCN dairy researcher, Jan van Beekhuizen, provided an introduction to the Dutch dairy sector. He pointed that in The Netherlands, an imporant dairy producer and exporter, the key challenges that farmers were facing were land competition and strict environmental regulations, especially regarding manure management and nitrogen emissions.

These local challenges reflect broader global trends in dairy production and market dynamics where the global milk production growth has slowed to 2.0% annually, with informal sectors expanding faster than formal ones. Traditional exporters like Europe and Oceania see stagnation due to climate, labor, and policy constraints, while regions such as Asia and Africa show growth potential. In response to labor shortages and an aging workforce, mature markets lean more on automation. The findings, based on early analysis by the IFCN team, highlight key shifts shaping the future of the dairy sector.

Despite these pressures, high milk prices and lower production costs have boosted global farm profitability, with the U.S. seeing especially strong returns. In addition, sustainability — both environmental and economic — is becoming a top priority, driving global collaboration and policy support. These insights, prepared and presented by the IFCN team, represent preliminary results.

During the panel discussion "Dairy under pressure: What is driving market trends & farm economics?", international experts stressed the vital role farmers play in shaping a sustainable future. In the Netherlands, farmers are seen as environmental problem-solvers through innovation. In Switzerland, while farmers benefit from direct payments, much of this support is absorbed by the elevated costs of farm machinery and equipment—significantly higher than in many other countries—limiting the intended financial relief for producers. In Canada, consumers actively seek out dairy products bearing the Blue Cow logo, looking to support local dairy farmers, while consumer expectations are also important to farmers. In Uruguay, dairy farmers are boosting production by prioritizing efficient grassland management and upholding high standards of animal welfare, reinforcing their commitment to sustainable and responsible farming practices. The message was clear: supporting farmers is key to a resilient and thriving global dairy sector.

Resilience as a path to sustainability
Sustainability in dairy farming is increasingly recognized not just as a matter of survival, but as a path to thriving in a changing world. In this sense, Regional Deputy Abel Kooistra emphasized, "We are making 'farmer diversity' a leading principle. A diversity of farming types and styles keeps the sector resilient and robust." This approach highlights the importance of supporting varied farming models to ensure a strong, adaptable, and sustainable dairy sector.

In the Netherlands, resilience in dairy farming means adapting to a growing number of environmental regulations—ranging from biodiversity requirements and protein ratios to upcoming rules on organic fertilizer use and animal welfare. Facing these challenges, farmers must be robust, adaptable, or transformative. Reflecting global relevance, over half of the international audience from 40+ countries reported taking a more adaptive approach to farming in their own regions.

Maria Sanchez, IDF Scientific Programme Manager, noted that while developing nations prioritise welfare and efficiency, developed countries focus on emissions. Therefore, IDF took up the task to develop and continuously update an LCA model which is freely available and thus enables to measure, compare, and benchmark emissions uniformly across the world. Ernesto Reyes, Dairy Development Sector Lead at GDP, highlighted the critical socio-economic role of dairy, noting that as the sector grows, it improves access to affordable, high-value nutrients for more people. He emphasized the importance of financial mechanisms that produce, protect, and restore, calling them essential tools to support farmers in building resilience and ensuring sustainable dairy development.

During the event, it was emphasized that dairy farm managers today shall be more "people managers" rather than just "cow managers." Understanding what motivates employees to stay — or causes them to leave — is now crucial for building a stable, skilled workforce in the dairy sector.

In the U.S., dairy farmers work toward ambitious sustainability targets, including GHG neutrality, optimised water use, and improved nutrient management — though clear pathways and metrics are still evolving. In Brazil, resilience is driven by flexibility and adaptability, yet challenges remain in boosting collaboration and innovation. In Portugal, resilience and anti-fragility, fueled by farmers' dedication and advanced technologies, have driven strong productivity gains across the sector.

Dairy in 2035: On track or off course?
Between 2020 and 2025, the global dairy industry endured major disruptions — from the COVID-19 pandemic and inflation to climate change and shifting consumer demand, especially for high-fat products. These pressures reshaped milk production, prices, and trade worldwide. While mature markets like Europe and Oceania face stagnation and regulatory hurdles, demand in Asia and Africa is rising — though supply struggles persist. Slowing production growth has prompted a pivot toward efficiency and smarter product mixes. High milk prices persist amid tight supply and ongoing risks like extreme weather and disease. To meet rising global demand by 2035, the sector must embrace innovation, strategic planning, and tailored regional approaches.

Resilience in dairy farming ultimately depends on people — the farmers, workers, and leaders who drive the sector forward. Strong leadership is essential to foster adaptability and ensure consistent performance, especially in times of change and uncertainty.

At the "Dairy in 2035: On Track or Off Course?" panel, global experts shared varied outlooks. India progresses with smart government investment. Zimbabwe dairy farming is expanding efficiently and processor support the dairy sector. Argentina sees opportunity through reinvestment in infrastructure. In contrast, Germany struggles under strict environmental regulations, and Italy faces succession issues as fewer young people enter farming. The global dairy industry's path to 2035 hinges on people-centered resilience, smart investment, and adaptable strategies to balance growing demand with sustainable production.

After three days of intensive discussion, all participants agreed that the global dairy sector's future would depend on its ability to adapt through innovation, support its farmers, and lead with resilient, people-focused strategies to ensure sustainable growth.

The event was hosted by Dairy Campus and Friesland Convention Partners, as well as supported by the companies: Cargill, FrieslandCampina, Trouw Nutrition and ab agri.

About: IFCN is a global dairy research and consultancy network based in Kiel, Germany. Founded in 2000, it now brings together more than 100 researchers and provides expertise in the form of data services to more than 140 companies in the global dairy supply chain.

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