

Challenges for farms

Nowadays, farmers in The Netherlands are faced with many challenges: It is still not clear how the issues with respect to nature conservation are going to impact legislation around nitrogen emissions and deposition. "What we do know is that nitrogen efficiency in livestock farming will remain a hot topic in the years to come", says Martin Vrijkorte, Manager Farms at Schothorst Feed Research. And future challenges include water quality and green house gas emissions.

Schothorst Feed Research is a research institute, but also a practical livestock farm with ruminants, swine and poultry. "This means that new regulations will also impact our own enterprise", Vrijkorte emphasizes: "If and when we need to reduce the number of food producing animals in The Netherlands, this could have major consequences for us and for our clients."

However, Vrijkorte and his fellow researchers expect that a substantial part of the emission reduction can be achieved with dietary measures and other innovative techniques. Whether these options will be embraced by the government and society is not clear yet.

Fortunately, SFR researchers are experts when it comes to feed efficiency and minimizing emissions on farm. "My colleagues and I are skilled and knowledgeable and we support our clients in their management decisions. Our ultimate goal at SFR is always to provide farmers and the feed industry with knowledge and advice to improve feeding strategies, diet composition and animal health, and to reduce the environmental impact of livestock farming", Vrijkorte explains.

But how to ensure profitability in these uncertain times?

According to Vrijkorte, diversification can be the answer: "The farmer and the location of his farm are key factors. Livestock is not necessarily the only source of income. Some entrepreneurs may choose to provide childcare on their farm or start a farm shop. These are viable options for farms located in the proximity of towns or cities." Vrijkorte was born and raised in Twente, in the province of Overijssel: "This is an area with a lot of tourism. During cycling or walking trips, it is nice to visit a farm to have drinks and bites, or to purchase local produce at a farm shop."

Martin Vrijkorte foresees that The Netherlands is open for a variety of farming systems: "There is still room for highly efficient farming and our country is extremely skilled in this respect: We are able to produce a lot of milk, eggs and meat, with relatively low inputs. Also, a high level of animal health and welfare is maintained in our livestock sector."

Ruminants are unique in converting inedible plant material (grass, co-products from crops and human food production) into valuable food for human consumption. "For dairy and arable farmers in The Netherlands, new regulations for the protection of biodiversity will have consequences", Vrijkorte states. "They may be obliged to maintain buffer zones on their land to provide space for insects and birds. These strips of land may be used to grow clover or lupins."

Solutions

More cooperation between arable farmers and livestock farmers may be a part of the solution. For dairy farmers, the quality of forages will become even more important in the future, Vrijkorte expects. "Making optimal use of available forages will lead to less dependence on concentrates and this will benefit feed efficiency. To optimize rations, additives and rumen bypass amino acids may be added to ensure animal health and productivity." Vrijkorte sees a trend in feeding ruminants with more fibrous feeds and less cereal

grains and corn. Schothorst Feed Research investigates strategies on how to optimize rations for dairy cows. Furthermore circularity becomes more important. Therefore, Vrijkorte expects that local arable farmers will start to produce local protein feeds for dairy farmers: "In the future, crop residues, like leaves from sugarbeet or legume crops, may be applied as feedstuff for livestock."

The same goes for pigs and poultry farming: Research at SFR has proven that a higher nitrogen efficiency in these animal species is obtained by adjusting the feed composition to the requirements of the animal. "This can be done by lowering the crude protein content, while adding free amino acids to fulfill the amino acids requirements of the animal in each stage of life", Vrijkorte explains. From an animal welfare standpoint, new concepts, like raising male chicks from laying hen lines, and growing pigs with undocked tails, are foreseen. At Schothorst Feed Research, trials are performed to gain insight in the specific requirements of such systems.

Perspectives

Despite all the uncertainties, Martin Vrijkorte is positive about the future: "In the past, intensifying production seemed the only way: keeping more animals on the farm and increasing the production level. Nowadays, we know that there is not just one road to reach a certain goal. It is a challenge to obtain a good farm profitability and create more added value where possible. Our research on low protein diets is largely based on the application of local feedstuffs, and on optimization of feed composition. Also, new innovative technologies like the Lely sphere, the Hanskamp Cowtoilet and innovative airwashers may contribute to these goals."

SFR contributes to successful innovations in livestock farming, hopefully enabling no, or just a small, reduction in numbers of animals.

It is crucial that the market goes along with this: Production and consumption need to move together, towards a more animal and environment friendly direction, Vrijkorte concludes.

Niet voor publicatie

Noot voor de redactie

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