

Media Release

Less concentrate feeding can be done!

(Frick/Rheinau 25 April 2012) **For ethical and environmental reasons organic farmers are already limiting concentrate feeding to a maximum of 10% of ruminant rations. But are concentrate feeds really indispensable for economic and livestock health reasons? The “Feed no Food” project shows that concentrate feeds can be reduced further – or even eliminated from the diet altogether – without significant impacts on livestock health or economic performance.**

On Wednesday the Swiss Research Institute of Organic Agriculture, FiBL, presented the results of the three-year “Feed no Food” project to researchers and practitioners at the Gut Rheinau estate near Zurich. The project received substantial funding from the Coop Sustainability Fund established by the Swiss retail group Coop.

Agricultural production of concentrate feeds competes with the production of crops for human consumption. This is why organic farmers today are allowed to feed no more than 10% concentrates as part of ruminant rations. FiBL has now studied whether concentrate feeding in Swiss organic cattle production can be further reduced or eliminated altogether.

In an experimental study the researchers divided a herd of 70 dairy cows on the Wauwilermoos holding into two groups. Half of the cows continued to be fed 10 percent concentrate feeds as part of their ration as permitted; the other half received only roughage. As expected, the milk yield of the group receiving no concentrates dropped by six percent, that of first-calf heifers by 15 percent. Yet contrary to widespread opinion the reduction in concentrate feeding proved positive for cattle health: cows that had not been fed concentrates had slightly better body condition scores and udder health; their other health traits as well as their fertility were equally as good as those of cows that had received concentrate feeds.

The research team headed by FiBL veterinarian Christophe Notz further investigated the potential to reduce concentrate feed consumption on 70 organic dairy farms. The participating farmers were free to decide whether they wanted to reduce concentrates to five percent of the rations or to feed no concentrates at all. The FiBL veterinarians and agronomists visited each holding four times a year to assess the nutritional and health status of each individual cow. These surveys together with the monthly milk recording were

EXCELLENCE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Das FiBL hat Standorte in der Schweiz, Deutschland und Österreich
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used to provide individual guidance on minimizing concentrate feeds in the third year of the project.

After three years, two thirds of the holdings that had aimed at reducing concentrate levels to five percent had achieved this goal. Overall, 24 percent less concentrate feeds were used in this group. Half of the holdings that had aimed at completely eliminating concentrates from their dairy rations had achieved that goal. In this group the overall use of concentrate feeds was reduced by 70 percent with average milk yield dropping by only five percent. The dairy cows on these commercial farms responded to a reduction in concentrate feeds with a moderate reduction in milk yield and remained healthy and fertile.

The economic analyses have shown that on average these holdings have been able to compensate for lower returns from milk production with lower outlays for concentrate feeds. Suitable adaptive strategies such as fully pasture-based production during the grazing season, no silage feeding, or improved forage quality can further improve farm operating results.

The results from the two groups of farms taken together show a potential concentrate feed reduction of 31 percent or 112 kg per cow per year. Extrapolating this result to the aggregate concentrate feed usage of 26,000 tons in Swiss organic dairy units, a total of 8,000 tons of concentrates could be saved.

For FiBL Director Urs Niggli the “Feed no Food” project is a pioneering effort and also has relevance for non-organic dairy production, as there is a major potential for reducing concentrate feeds in this sector. Christian Guggisberg, Head of Food Purchasing at Coop, is convinced that organic holdings making optimum use of the resources available in Switzerland can set an example. They thus create definite added value for consumers and for Swiss agriculture overall. He stresses that organic milk produced with as little concentrates as possible is such an added value.

This press release on the Internet:

This press release, a background publication, an interview with project manager Christophe Notz, and suitable media photos are available on the Internet at www.fibl.org/en/media.html

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