

# Livestock

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## What's happening in Germany, France and the Netherlands?



In advance of speaking at the Moorepark open day, Aidan Brennan caught up with some international researchers to see what is happening in their countries

### Valérie Brocard France

**1** Give us a very brief introduction to who you are, who you work for and what your role is.

My name is Valérie Brocard, I work for the French Livestock Institute, which is a farmer-funded applied research institute dealing with cattle, sheep, goats and horses (and, of course, all topics related to environmental issues, climate change and forage production).

I work on dairy cow feeding and nutrition and I am in charge of the experiments implemented on two experimental farms located in Brittany, where we have one farm in conventional production and a second one in organic production.

I am also leader of the H2o2o European project Resilience4Dairy.



Valérie Brocard is a dairy researcher from France.



**2** What are the recent trends in terms of changes in the dairy industry in your country?

Main trends: decrease in the cow numbers of -2.3% in 2022, which is the biggest annual decrease ever. Milk deliveries reduced by 0.7% with very dry spring and summer conditions. Herd sizes are increasing slowly and production per cow is quite stable.

The cost of concentrate in the second half of the year limited its use. There are problems with more dairy farms converting to organic. Milk consumption has decreased by almost 1% with inflation and change of behaviour of consumers.

There is too much organic milk and not enough added value (no organic cheese) with organics.

The milk price for organic production is stable, while the conventional price has been increasing and now both prices are at the same level.

**3** Were dairy farms profitable in 2022 and how do they compare with other land uses, such as tillage and forestry?

The margin over costs increased in 2022 thanks to the increase in milk price (which has been higher than the increase of the costs until now). The most profitable farms in France are wine, crops and



Herd sizes are increasing slowly and production per cow is quite stable in France.

some specialised vegetable farms with milk far behind but better than beef or sheep.

The main current issue is the lack of attractiveness for dairying and generational renewal on farms. It is difficult to find staff and this is the main issue in order to keep the same level of production in the future.

Many programmes to reinforce attractiveness of dairying, and special training for people not from dairy or farming. Seventy five per cent of the new milking parlours in Brittany are robots which leads to strong decrease in grazing and big increase in costs.

**4** What are the main challenges facing dairy farmers?

The main issues are a lack of staff and low forage stocks after several very dry years. We have been implementing the Nitrates Directive since 1995 with no derogation, so environmental rules are no longer a problem. We respect the 170kg N/ha in all vulnerable zones or even less in some specific areas.

To reach that, we had to decrease our stocking rates and all farms had to build slurry/manure stores in the period from 1995 to 2010. Restrictions on fertiliser were implemented many years ago.

The main target now is to decrease the carbon footprint because the dairy companies are implementing the national low carbon dairy farm scheme; it's also

necessary to export milk and show their responsibility. The main issue is generational renewal and lack of staff.

**5** In terms of environmental challenges, what are the main targets that have been set and in what time period and can they be achieved?

The target is to reduce carbon footprint by 18% by 2030 and 46% by 2050.

**6** What changes are currently happening on farms to meet these challenges?

To decrease carbon footprint, farmers are encouraged to reduce replacement rate, use more beef crossbreds, aim for a small decrease in age at first calving, plant hedges, have more grass in rotation (for silage mostly) and more and more maize and grass silages in mixed diets in winter.

The most efficient do not need to do anything. Cow numbers are decreasing so the carbon footprint of dairy farming is decreasing also.

**7** What new research is going on which will help to solve these challenges in the future?

I am working on the resilience for dairy programme which looks at three areas; economic and social resilience, technical efficiency and environment, welfare and society.

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### Agnes van den Pol-van Dassler Netherlands

**1** A very brief introduction to who you are, who you work for and what your role is.

My name is Dr Agnes van den Pol-van Dasselaar and I work as Professor of Grassland and Grazing at Aeres University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. Furthermore, I am the current president of the European Grassland Federation.



Agnes van den Pol-van Dasselaar is a dairy researcher from the Netherlands.

**2** What are the recent trends in terms of changes in the dairy industry in your country?

Scale of production, average herd size, the number of dairy farms and outlook for dairy production.

**3** Are dairy farms profitable in 2022 and how do they compare with other land uses such as tillage and forestry?

2022 was an extraordinary year.

Both milk prices and costs were very high. Overall, 2022 was profitable for dairy farming.

In 2022, net profit (revenues minus all expenses but excluding labour) was around 17c/kg milk produced. This equals €1,500 to €1,600 per cow.

**4** What are the main challenges facing dairy farmers – environmental, climate stress, economic pressures or other?

All of the above are challenges at present in the Netherlands. Currently, the main challenges are the environmental targets (especially nitrogen reduction).





## Lisa Oelhart Germany

### 1 A very brief introduction to who you are, who you work for and what your role is.

I studied ag sciences (BSc) and process and quality management in agriculture with an emphasis on animal production (MSc).

My dairy farming experience includes Germany, the Netherlands and New Zealand. Due to my experience on Kiwi farms, I now work for the Grassland Centre Lower Saxony/Bremen where I put my expertise to use as a grazing expert and project manager for a pastoral dairy welfare project.

### 2 What are the recent trends in terms of changes in the dairy industry in your country (the scale of production, average herd size, number of dairy farms and outlook for dairy production)?

Over the years, the trend has been very clear. The number of dairy farms and cows is decreasing. At the same time, herd sizes and milk yield per animal and year increased. Therefore, the national annual milk yield has remained steady.

On the consumer side, domestic milk consumption decreased slightly for the last two years. However, pasture milk demand has seen a considerable increase in recent years.

### 3 Are dairy farms profitable in 2022 and how do they compare with other land uses such as tillage, forestry, etc?

2022 started out with a rising GDT, combined with feed and input supply contracts that were still in place – profit margins looked great. However, the cost of production rose considerably during the second half of 2022.

Reasons were the war on Ukraine and the following energy crisis, as well as inflation, a staggered minimum wage increase of 22%, and another hot summer with severe droughts in many regions.

Overall, the average dairy operation ended up breaking even in 2022, with both milk prices and production costs sitting just above 53c/l.



Lisa Oelhart is a researcher based in Germany.



The number of dairy farms and cows is decreasing in Germany.

### 4 What are the main challenges facing dairy farmers – environmental, climate stress, economic pressures or other?

All of the above. Directly on farm, on a practical level, I would say that economic pressures (cost inflation, GDT developments, significantly higher labour costs, if qualified labour can be found in the first place) are the most prominent, closely followed by climate stress. Since 2018, we have had droughts every year, most of them drying out and damaging not only topsoil but also the subsoil horizons. This has obviously led to uncertainty as far as feed and forage production or grazing goes.

GHG emissions, ground water quality and similar issues are regulated, and farms have to be in compliance, so these issues certainly are on farmers' minds as well.

### 5 What changes are currently happening on farms to meet climate challenges?

Slurry storage units are now being covered to reduce emissions and slurry spreading is done directly into or onto the ground to avoid N vaporisation losses.

Nitrogen from organic manure is capped at 170kg/ha. Precision farming techniques improve N losses when applying mineral fertiliser.

Another approach is to improve our cow genetics by selecting for a higher lifetime daily yield.

### 6 What new research is going on which will help to solve these challenges in the future?

Research is being done to improve climate resiliency on farms (eg breeding more drought tolerant ryegrass varieties) but also on ways to improve GHG emissions.

Several research projects are tackling methane emissions from dairy farming,

be it via feed additives, new ration controlling and management or via genetic improvements.

Currently, the protection of peatland is a prominent topic in politics and in society, so research into the future viability of using it for agricultural production is being stepped up.



Research is being done to improve climate resiliency on farms



SEE ALSO  
For more coverage, read our eight-page Moorepark Focus starting on page 39

Table 1: Milk production data Netherlands (1984-2022)

	1984	2015	2022
Milk yield (million tonnes)	12.7	13.3	14.5
Dairy farmers ('000)	60	18	15
Dairy cows (million)	2.5	1.6	1.6
Milk yield (kg/cow)	5,000	8,373	9,086

### 5 In terms of environmental challenges, what are the main targets that have been set and in what time period and can they be achieved?

The main challenge is nitrogen reduction. Targets for reductions are based on at least 40% of nitrogen-sensitive nature in protected Natura 2000-areas should have healthy nitrogen levels in 2025, 50% in 2030 and 74% in 2035.

Furthermore, the current Government wants to accelerate the final target from 2035 to 2030.

There is still debate on this, it is not yet law.

The reduction targets will differ between regions, but as for now it is unclear what the targets will be in the different regions.

Overall, the targets are expected to lead to a reduction of animal numbers.

### 6 What changes are happening on farms to meet these challenges?

Many farmers are waiting for final farm targets. In the meantime, relatively small changes occur in management, eg in grassland management and manure management.

### 7 What new research is going on which will help to solve these challenges in the future?

Research into grazing and sustainable agriculture. Also, a large national programme on emissions is being carried out (feed track, animal track, manure track, stable track) to support farmers in emissions reduction.

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