Grazing towards sustainability

January 12 2016

The first international Global Farm Platform conference hosted by the University of Bristol this week [12 to 15 January] will highlight the benefits of utilising pasture and robust cows over high-yield, intensive systems.

Research findings from data shared between Vet School researcher, Professor Michael Lee and farmer, Neil Darwent, Director of the UK's Free Range Dairy Community Interest Company (CIC), will form part of a keynote address to be given by Professor Lee tomorrow [Wednesday 13 January].

The Global Farm Platform is a multidisciplinary group of scientists working under the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) to find solutions to the major challenges facing global food security in the twenty first century.

The partnership is a new initiative to provide high quality scientific investigation in centres of excellence around the world, allowing research to progress further and faster than would otherwise be possible working as individual institutions.

An important part of this work is the collaboration not just with scientists but also farmers. This is to ensure that knowledge from farmers contributes to the research agenda and dissemination of best practices and vice versa.

An example of the knowledge exchange between farmer and researcher

is the data shared between Professor Lee and Neil Darwent, which compared the net margin generated by a robust cow managed on simple, pasture-based system with a high output cow managed under a more intensive regime.

The findings highlight that traditional measurement of dairy cow performance, in terms of milk output and margin over feed, is over simplistic and fails to provide a true assessment of animal performance and efficiency. Whilst at first glance, a more intensively managed cow appears to be more economically viable, further investigation reveals that attributes of more robust cows such as good health and fertility, the capacity to produce more valuable beef calves and the ability to thrive on a simple, low-cost system, can more than compensate for lower milk yields.

Professor Michael Lee, Chair in Sustainable Livestock Systems in the School of Veterinary Sciences at the University of Bristol and Head of Rothamsted Research, North Wyke site, said: "The Global Farm Platform is striving to develop sustainable solutions for ruminant livestock production as a crucial part of world food security. It is vital to realise that yield alone does not provide the most efficient or indeed sustainable solution. Cattle as ruminants should rely on pasture and home grown forages to provide a high proportion of their diet - such reliance on home grown feed is a clear route towards sustainability. This paper summarises the main benefits of maximising pasture intake in ruminant systems towards economic, environmental and social sustainability and the crucial role the North Wyke Farm Platform is playing."

More information: The presentation 'Grazing towards sustainability' by Professor Michael Lee using data collected by Neil Darwent to show the benefits of utilising pasture and robust cows over high yield, intensive systems will take place on Wednesday 13 January at 9.20 am at At- Bristol Centre, Harbourside, Bristol BS1 5DB.

Provided by University of Bristol