The RSPCA welfare standards for dairy cattle prohibit systems which house cattle all year round, but they do not set any limits on herd size and there is no welfare related evidence base to indicate this is necessary. We also have no evidence to suggest that large scale dairy production is set to spread across the British countryside. At present, there are only around 25 UK herds of over 750 animals out of a total of between 11,000 -12,000 dairy herds in the UK. The average herd size is around 113-120 cows.

Those larger herds that we ourselves have visited have been housed in purpose built accommodation for the modern dairy cow, and we have concluded that the levels of comfort and welfare in these systems combined with excellent levels of stockmanship, have often exceeded those seen in older more traditional housing systems.

It should be acknowledged that if something goes wrong on a large farm (e.g. a disease outbreak; problem with a water delivery system, etc), there is clearly a risk to the welfare of a greater number of animals than would be the case on a smaller unit. This highlights the importance of ensuring that best practice is applied on all units, regardless of size, and that contingency plans are in place to safeguard the welfare of all animals should an emergency arise.

The RSPCA’s focus is always on the welfare of each individual animal, regardless of the size of a farming enterprise. The Society was one of the first organisations to call for a National Dairy Cow Welfare Strategy, which is now in its second year. The Society continues to be involved in a number of dairy-based initiatives whose goal is to improve the welfare of the dairy cow, notably:

- The Cattle Health and Welfare Group for England, which administers the National Dairy Cow Welfare Strategy
- The Genetics Advisory Forum, which provides the tools for farmers to breed more robust cattle
- The Healthy Feet project, where the aim was to develop strategies to help to reduce levels of dairy cow lameness
- The Assurewel project, where the RSPCA, Soil Association and the University of Bristol Veterinary school are developing a set of practical dairy cow welfare outcome measures, which we hope will eventually be adopted by the UK dairy industry.

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We have also been co-sponsors of the National Cattle Mobility Event in the past, and have funded research projects relating to a number of dairy cow welfare issues.

A report by DairyCo, Andersons Consultants and the University of Nottingham published in January 2013 on the Structure of the GB Dairy Farming Industry – what drives change, stated that there was no evidence to suggest that larger producers were forcing smaller producers out of business, and concluded that farm survival was more a function of management than size itself.

The RSPCA’s overall conclusion is that the size of a dairy farm is not the key issue in relation to the welfare of the animals, it is the conditions, stockmanship and overall husbandry which are the factors which contribute to the overall welfare status of the animals. It is whether the farming operation, regardless of size, can meet the welfare needs of each individual animal that really matters.