Develop economic sound free walk farming systems elevating animal welfare, health and manure quality, while being appreciated by society (FreeWalk)

CATTLE

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Problem(s) addressed in the project

- Development of cubicle housing increased labour efficiency of cattle farming, but animal welfare is a critical factor
- Productivity of grasslands and crop management systems increased over the years – however soil structure, soil life and biodiversity of grasslands are becoming poorer
- Good integration of housing and farming facilities in the landscape positively contributes to societal acceptance

Objectives

- to research and further develop economic sound free walk cattle farming (FWF) systems that improve animal welfare, longevity and manure quality, soil structure and increase capital efficiency, while addressing environmental impacts
- this system is expected to improve the social and economic resilience of farming

Interim Research Findings

- The research concentrates on comparison of 22 FreeWalk case farms (bedded pack barns) with 22 reference farms (cubicles) in 6 European countries
- Measurements on these farms concern climate of bedding and barn, dry matter of bedding, cow welfare, milk quality, and the NPC cycle on farm
- Cow welfare measurements were done on all 44 farms selected for evaluation, using animal-based measures, from an adaptation of the Welfare Quality® Protocol

Future research and activities

Further analysis are in progress to find the most advantageous system to improve animal welfare; Follow-up research regarding antibiotics use intends to find out if the found difference is a purely housing effect or caused by differences in farmers' attitude (or both); The bacteria flora measurements in the composting bedding of FreeWalk barns ask for more insight; Societal appreciation of the different housing systems will be assessed by using a survey distributed in 8 countries; Economic aspects will be evaluated by modelling; Multi-criteria analysis will be performed on base of all collected data