



### Back to the future: remaining challenges for the dairy goat industry

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In the Netherlands, dairy goat farming found its origin after introduction of a quota system for the dairy cattle industry in 1984. In the 1990's, the average number of goats per farm was approximately 200 animals. The main "on farm" animal health challenges for these pioneers, as the dairy goat farmers in those days can be called, were clostridial diseases, listeriosis, abortion, and rearing problems in kids, like pasteurellosis, coccidiosis, and cryptosporidiosis. Another challenge, were and still are, diseases with an impact on a large part of the dairy goat industry like caseous lymphadenitis (CL), paratuberculosis and caprine arthritis and encephalitis (CAE). After the last millennium change, the number of goats per farm started to increase. Between 2007 and 2010, *Coxiella burnetii* shedding dairy goats were kept responsible for an outbreak of Q fever among people. This largest ever described outbreak of Q fever had and still has a great impact on current Dutch dairy goat farming: although vaccination is still mandatory, and compulsory bulk tank milk surveillance has not detected any positive farms in the last three years, the general public and human health professionals still think that dairy goats pose a serious risk to human health.

In 2017, the average number of goats on in total 382 Dutch dairy goat farms was 1270; the largest farm in the Netherlands keeps more than ten thousand goats. A continuous increase in herd size has consequences for the management of these farms: extended milking has more or less become the standard, for male kids a purpose still has to be sought, a very often foreign and unexperienced workforce can be found on many of these farms, and working in protocols comes into use. Also veterinarians have to adapt; they must become aware of differences in transmission risk of the more traditional diseases like CL, CAE, and paratuberculosis, but also have to be prepared of less familiar diseases in dairy goats like salmonellosis. Farm specific vaccination schemes have to be set up, and restrictive use of antibiotics is a challenge especially during rearing of kids and fattening of young bucks. Prevention of introduction and of spreading of diseases within farms should be top priority for dairy goat farmers.

In an industry where still a part of the pioneers from the 1990's is active as a dairy goat farmer, the continuous increase in farm size seems to bring new challenges. In many cases, biosecurity should be improved and veterinarians should take their part in this change. The precautionary principle is currently applied after recent research suggests a 'causal' association between dairy goats farms and respiratory disorders in people living in the neighbourhood of goat farms. As a consequence, existing dairy goat farms are not allowed to expand, and in most of the provinces in the Netherlands there are no possibilities to start a new dairy goat farm.

Besides these challenges, there are also opportunities. There is an increasing interest in products from goats, as well nationally as internationally. Consequently, milk prices have been reasonable good for several years already. The health status of Dutch dairy goats also brings an opportunity to export dairy goats. Although scrapie has never been found in a Dutch dairy goat, export rules for scrapie and the interpretation of these rules make that many dairy goat farmers are not able to export. In the near future, legislation seems to be adapted and export based on scrapie resistant genotypes, as has been shown successfully in sheep, could improve the export position of healthy Dutch dairy goats.