

Transition towards more robust cows on Walloon dairy farms for a better use of forage resources

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Producing a greater proportion of milk from forage is a lever to reduce production costs in dairy farms and move towards more sustainability. For farmers, possibilities to reach this objective are diverse, including moving towards cows that are better able to promote a diet based mainly on grass. However, implementing this change remains a source of hesitation and questioning for farmers. The objective of the study is to address this practice change from technical and human perspectives in order to help dairy farmers evolve their system more serenely. Semi-directive interviews were conducted in 17 Walloon dairy farms, which evolved their Holstein herd into a mixed breed or Jersey dairy herd. The objective of the EFFORT project¹ was to determine the reasons, difficulties encountered and levers activated during the transition towards the new practice.

For some farms, the evolution towards a more robust breed, combined with other practices changes (increased ratio of grazed grass in the food ration, transition to organic farming, etc.), has had the effect of changing the 'identity' of the dairy farm system. For other farms, the change came as an improvement of a system already in place. Among of the 17 farmers, the majority say that they have evolved towards a more robust breed with the aim to have a cow more adapted to their grazing system. However, the study shows that transition to this practice is also of interest in systems where grazing is important or not, but where the desire to have a more robust herd is mainly linked to objectives to improve herd health, to cheese processing or linked to a great affinity of the farmer for the new breed.

Uncertainties about the choice of another breed and criteria related to the bull's selection, or disagreements with the entourage (family, seed sellers ...) are examples of difficulties encountered in the farms interviewed. Exchanges between farmers, in Belgium or abroad, to benefit from each other's experiences are an example of the levers mentioned. Other technical levers are the fact not to bet on the litrages when choosing the other breed bull, to know well the defects of the new breed, or even to evolve gradually the herd with the crossings in order to have the possibility to reverse. In general, the change of breed seems to have responded to the initial motivations of the farmers interviewed. Other impacts were also observed in terms of working time, production levels, etc. Finally, the 17 breeders express overall satisfaction with the change of breed and related practices: *"As the years go by, you gradually find the taste of work. It's nice, the cows are more willing, friendlier..."*.

This collection of ideas will finally allow dairy farmers who wish to have some ideas to secure their journey.

¹ EFFORT project : <https://www.cra.wallonie.be/fr/effort>