

END THE CAGE AGE FOR CALVES



The life of a calf in natural conditions

Cattle are social, gregarious animals and the maternal bond between a cow and her calf is of vital importance to both.

Under natural conditions, female cattle live in established herds of about 20 individuals. A cow will move away from the herd to give birth and may conceal her calf discreetly in long grass. The bond between cow and calf is quickly established. The mother cow produces milk to feed her calf, who will suckle for at least eight months and learn essential living skills from their mother and other herd members.

Communication is important for cattle; each cow and her calf use unique and exclusive calls to 'talk' to each other. When permitted to do so, mother cows and their daughters may retain a close relationship for years. After weaning, young male cattle sometimes form small groups.



A strong bond

The life of a calf reared for veal in the EU

A newborn calf destined for veal production is usually removed from their mother at a few hours old, once they have suckled antibody-rich colostrum, or immediately after birth and fed colostrum from a bottle. Under Council Directive 2008/119/EC on the protection of calves, the calf may then be shut into an individual stall for up to two months.

Separating the cow and her calf causes great and prolonged distress to both. Although the rules require that a veal calf must be able to see other calves from their pen, being reared in isolation damages calves' physical and social development. Over 12 million EU calves may be subjected to this each year.



Solitary confinement of very young calf

These young calves can have frail health and are for example at risk of pneumonia. Industry response has been to confine calves in separate pens but a pioneering dairy keeping cows and calves together has shown that doing so produces healthier and happier animals.

In standard production, after up to two months in isolation, the calf is moved to a group of up to 80 others, often in barren and overcrowded sheds with unsuitable slatted floors.

This suffering is completely unnecessary as higher welfare alternatives are available.

Higher welfare systems for calves

In enriched indoor systems, veal calves are reared from birth or soon afterwards in small groups in straw-bedded barns. The better indoor systems provide calves with more space and they may have access to the outdoors.

Many organic systems keep calves in groups and an older cow retired from the dairy herd will suckle them. These systems provide greater comfort, reduced risk of injury and better opportunities for natural behaviour, social interaction and exercise – all vitally important for calves' welfare.

However, the dairy industry needs fundamental reform so that cows and calves can stay together in familiar herds in well-managed, free-range systems that respect their sentience and the maternal bond, and allow natural weaning.

The Ethical Dairy, a high-welfare [farm](#) in Scotland, is leading the way by allowing cows and calves to stay together with the herd. The farmer says this has improved their health and has had a “staggering” impact on cow contentment.



Contented cows and their calves at the Ethical Dairy

EU legislation to End the Cage Age for calves

Compassion in World Farming calls for the phase-out the use of cages in EU animal agriculture by 2027, including individual stalls or pens for calves under eight weeks of age.

This could be achieved through a revision of Directive 98/58/EC on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes. The Directive stipulates that “where an animal is continuously or regularly confined, it must be given the space appropriate to its physiological and ethological needs in accordance with established experience and scientific knowledge.”

Confining very young calves in solitary housing does not fulfil this requirement.

Additionally, Article 13 TFEU requires “the Union and member states, since animals are sentient beings, to pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals.”

The vast majority of EU citizens demand reform for farmed animals; the 2016 Eurobarometer poll on animal welfare shows that 94% think protecting the welfare of farm animals is important. Since then the recent End the Cage Age European Citizens' Initiative has gathered well over the required one million validated signatures from across the EU.

It is time to End the Cage Age.

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