



Why keeping the calf with the cow matters!

Concerns about calf welfare in the dairy industry begin at birth, when calves are separated from their mothers almost immediately. They are placed in individual pens or hutches, where they spend most of their time alone, without the warmth and guidance of their mother or even a playmate, and without the chance to suckle warm milk naturally from a teat.

At just a couple of weeks old, still unsteady on their feet and with a developing immune system, they face transport, auction sales, collection centers, and even long-distance journeys. At the end of these stressful trips—during which their need for milk is not met—they frequently arrive at intensive white veal farms, where they face a life of indoor confinement on slatted floors and high use of antibiotics.

Calf-with-cow dairy systems address these challenges. By keeping calves with their mothers after birth, there is no need to transport such young fragile animals off the dairy farm. Both cow and calf benefit from improved welfare: mother cows can express natural maternal behavior while calves receive warmth, nurturing, and the opportunity to learn from an adult. Calves not destined for the dairy herd are raised for beef, not white veal.

Eyes on Animals and Kalverliefde recognize that transitioning to calf-with-cow systems cannot happen overnight. However, we aim to raise awareness of this approach, support farmers who produce dairy this way or want to switch, and help them succeed. That is why we organized this conference!



International Conference

On March 5–6, 2026, Eyes on Animals and Kalverliefde hosted the first international conference on calf-with-cow dairy farming. The conference brought together a diverse group of 70 participants from 12 countries across three continents—Europe, North America, and Australia. Attendees included farmers already working with calf-with-cow systems, those considering the transition, and others running small pilot groups, as well as several veterinarians and researchers specializing in this approach. A number of international animal welfare organizations also joined to help expand the movement in their own countries. It was an inspiring and significant gathering, where new connections were formed and practical knowledge, valuable tips, and insights were shared. Everyone was united by the same motivation—to learn and to put these ideas into practice.

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to step away from their farms or offices to attend this conference. Your dedication in creating a future with better welfare for both cows and calves, and also farmers, is what made this gathering truly meaningful.

On the following pages, you will find information about the key speakers, media coverage of the conference, key insights shared during the event, podcast interviews with farmers, video recordings of the conference, photos of the event and more !



Faces of calf-with cow farms

Charles Ellet is the milking manager at Ethical Dairy Farm in southwest Scotland, a pioneering farm where all calves stay with their mothers for five to six months and remain part of the herd while cows are milked once a day.

Weaning begins around six to eight weeks: cows and calves are initially separated at night but can still see and touch each other, helping them adjust gradually. After weaning, all calves stay on the farm—females often join the milking herd, while males are raised for beef.

Short video of Charles: <https://ap.lc/nYCok>



Cathy Palmer runs How Now Dairy in Australia and is the only farmer in the country who keeps calves with their mothers. All calves stay with their mothers for about three months, then weaning begins gradually, allowing both cow and calf to adjust naturally. By focusing on their bond, cow and calf welfare is improved.

Short video of Cathy: <https://ap.lc/KHXQO>



Dr. Kevin McSweeney is a veterinarian from the United States and the founder of Five Freedoms Dairy in Colorado. After years in the dairy sector, he became concerned about the growing distance between people and animals, leading him to start a small dairy farm where calves are not separated from their mothers at birth and cows are treated as individuals.

At Five Freedoms Dairy, calves stay with their mothers and nurse naturally for about six months before gradual weaning. Kevin observes that this leads to stronger, healthier calves. Although the system produces less milk, he values animal health and a compassionate human-animal relationship over profit. The farm sells its products directly to customers and at local farmers' markets. Short video of Kevin: <https://ap.lc/ZevZX>



Sander van Stee is the farmer behind Moral Eats Farm in Canada, a large farm (300) transitioning to a system where hopefully all calves will stay with their real mothers. Sander had always been taught that this was impossible, but after trying it with two calves—who grew up healthy and strong—he now keeps around 30 calves with the cows, using foster cows.

Driven by a commitment to improve the lives of farm animals, Sander plans to extend the barn and redesign it so that in the near future all calves can remain with their mothers. Bull calves on the farm are raised as grass-fed beef.

Short video of Sander: <https://ap.lc/xcxnQ>



Giving Milk a Good Shake

Dr. Margret Wenker holds a PhD in cow-calf contact and has conducted extensive research on how keeping cows and calves together affects their health and development. Her work examined biological factors such as calf growth, gut microbiota, immune and hormonal responses, as well as the health and performance of the cows. She also talked about the use of foster cows and different weaning methods, comparing abrupt and gradual weaning.

Her research compared no, part-time, and full-time cow-calf contact. Calves with maternal contact grew faster, and cows showed a strong motivation to reunite with their calves. When using foster cows, careful management is essential: not all cows accept non-biological calves, and multiple calves nursing from one udder increases the risk of teat damage. This highlights the need to support not just feeding, but also the natural nursing bond.

Short video of Margret: <https://ap.lc/fhyAJ>



Saro Ratter works for the Schweisfurth Stiftung, an organization dedicated to promoting sustainable, organic agriculture and ethical animal husbandry. The foundation supports calf-at-foot dairy farms in Germany and in collaboration with the Interest Group for Cow-Calf Contact they developed standards and a practical guide for farmers to implement a good calf-cow contact system.

The checklist covers key topics such as keeping calves with a cow (mother or foster) for at least 90 days, stress-reducing weaning methods, and providing safe spaces where calves can retreat. All guidelines go beyond the standard organic requirements, aiming to support both calf welfare and farm practicality.



Buorkerijwinkel



Durk Oosterhof is a Dutch Demeter dairy farmer at BioSüd, where calves are not separated from their mothers at birth but stay in the herd for around 2.5 months. After this period, weaning takes place gradually and gently: calves stop drinking milk while remaining in the same environment with their mothers, avoiding multiple changes at once. By this age, calves are fully ruminant and no longer dependent on milk. Durk finds that this approach contributes to a calm herd and healthier animals, and allows visitors to connect more closely with both the farm and the animals. Durk sells dairy products and meat directly from a store in his farm.

Poppe Braam is developing ALLEBEI—meaning “both”—a concept that embraces producing both milk and meat, rather than specializing in just dairy and treating male calves as unwanted by-products. It reflects a simple principle: if we produce and consume dairy, we must also take responsibility for the male calves that come with it. You cannot have one without the other.

Allebei offers a solution for male calves from calf-with-cow farms that cannot remain on the farm beyond the late weaning stage. Instead of being sent into veal production, these calves go to Allebei, where they are given a good quality of life. The system focuses on raising intact (non-castrated) bulls outdoors, allowing them to graze and mature naturally, and ultimately be used for beef rather than veal. Products from ALLEBEI are available at Ekoplaza natural food stores in the Netherlands.



Stronger together

Improving the welfare for cows and calves was at the heart of this conference but it was also a unique opportunity for farmers and others involved or interested in calf-cow contact to come together and connect. Many participants expressed that it can feel lonely being the only calf-with-cow dairy farmer in their region, state, or country- and that finding a system that works for your farm is not always easy as a pioneer. We learned that there is no single blueprint for keeping calves with their mothers. The conference offered a space to share experiences, exchange ideas, and gather practical tips, many of which are highlighted in the box below for inspiration.

It is also a financial struggle to make ends meet- more support and awareness is needed from consumers and the market. The idea of animal-welfare organizations showing more support and educating their followers about this movement was brought to the table, as well as encouraging consumers to go more out of their way to support calf-with-cow dairy options.

Calf-with-cow tips

- It is important that calves interact closely with their mothers. When calves lick their mother's mouth, they ingest rumen microbes that help develop a healthy gut. – Dr. Kevin McSweeney, Five Freedoms Dairy
- Treat calves as individuals, not as a group. Weaning starts when each calf is ready, not on a fixed date. – Charles Ellet, The Ethical Dairy
- City people are your friends. Stay connected with your customers—they often look for animal-friendly products. – Cathy Palmer, How Now Dairy
- Using foster cows requires attention to both the calf's needs and the mother's comfort. It's about more than milk – it's about respecting the nursing bond and protecting the cows. – Dr. Marget Wenker
- It is important to socialize calves from an early age, helping them get used to human contact and giving them plenty of attention. This not only supports their development and wellbeing, but also improves safety for both animals and people. – Durk Oosterhof, Ohio
- In the first days after birth, farmers should keep calf and cow together in a separate space, closely monitoring them to ensure the calf finds the udder, receives enough colostrum, and forms a strong bond with its mother before rejoining the herd – All speakers



After the two-day conference, some farmers had a chance to spend a little extra time in the Netherlands before returning home. Two Canadian farmers, Sander van Stee (Moral Milk) and Joel Fox (Foxdale Farm), visited the calf-with-cow dairy farm of Corne Ansems (De Ruurhoeve in Hoogeloon). Corne combines a milking robot with a system where calves stay with their mothers in the herd.

Both Canadian farmers were looking for new ideas to smoothly keep their calves with the mothers. The visit allowed them to see practical solutions in action and exchange knowledge—highlighting the value of learning directly from other farms.

“Visiting Corne’s farm was extremely helpful! I highly recommend anyone to take a look if they get the chance. We’ve even changed our barn plans so that we can use robots to automate fence-line weaning, just like Corne does.” Sander van Stee.

Short video of Joel Fox: <https://ap.lc/dSfBz>



Conference feedback!

After the conference, we received a great deal of positive feedback—not only from those who attended, but also from people who followed the event from a distance via social media. Many shared how valuable and inspiring they found the conference, and how important it is to create spaces like this for non-judgmental exchange and discussion.

What stood out most was not just the kind words, but the connections that were made. People have started reaching out to each other, sharing ideas and even visiting each other's farms and continuing the conversation in a WhatsApp group set up after the conference, to stay connected with each other. For us, these real-life follow-ups are just as meaningful as the feedback itself.

Below, we've highlighted a selection of the responses we received.

Conference Positivity

"Howdy you two, you should be incredibly proud of that conference. You managed to get people all around the globe there to talk and share ideas. Plus (really importantly) to all feel supported. Most of us do it without much profit, donations or any government support. I heard nearly all of us say how lonely it can feel at times. Was great to have people not afraid to say that." – Farmer

"Thanks for everything. It has been awesome to finally meet you in person. And it was such an honor to be invited to this historic event. I really appreciate all your help in progressing the movement." – Farmer

"We will already present our project idea (about supporting Cow-Calf Contact movement) to our Team in April, not wait for October. We are extremely motivated" – German NGO

"I woke up at around 2 am and immediately pinged awake thinking about the last couple of days, foster cows etc. Thanks so much for the invite, I learned a lot. It was so nice to see so many farmers who are passionate about what they do and clearly care for their animals, and it was encouraging to see young women too!" – Irish NGO

"Thank you both so much: for organizing this great event, bringing people together (great minds think alike) & for the invitation. I am very happy, that I could join." – Swiss veterinarian

"Congratulations to the successful conference! I heard from colleagues about it and saw posts on LinkedIn.

"I'm always happy to share updates, and if you like, we can also arrange a meeting to exchange insights from the conference as well as discuss the topic of labelling. Within the TDN project we have established a working group on standards related to CowCalfContact, and I am happy to share the idea and background with you." – Austrian NGO

"For the ones working with robotic milking and looking to adjust or build for calves with cows, I would recommend taking contact to Jouni Pitkäranta from 4dbarns. He is an architect designing robotic milking barns based in Finland, but working on projects worldwide. I have been working with him on CCC (cow calf contact) on Danish farms since 2021, so there is for sure experience with calf and cows together in robotic systems." – Farmer

"I found the conference extremely valuable, as it showed that progress is being made worldwide, even though calf-at-foot systems are still a niche. There is much to learn—not only about housing systems, but also about how to communicate the story to consumers, so they truly understand, appreciate, and choose products from these pioneering farms. At the conference, everything came together: experienced farmers already working with cow-calf contact, farmers exploring these systems, animal welfare NGOs, concepts already available on the market, and experts from veterinary and scientific backgrounds. Everyone shared a remarkable amount of energy and passion for this journey." – Farmer

"We immediately started keeping calves with cows after the conference. And we now let the calves graze with the dairy herd from 6 months old. I would like to thank you all very much for the inspiring conference." – Farmer



Conference podcasts

Want to learn more about calf-at-foot dairy? Listen to the podcast Anders Kijken, hosted by **Christel van Raaij**, featuring Cathy Palmer from How Now Dairy Australia (in English) and Sander van der Stee from Moral Milk Canada (in Dutch).



Podcast with Cathy Palmer: <https://ap.lc/gcvLb>



Podcast with Sander van der Stee:
<https://ap.lc/XYFZR>

Conference in the Media

The conference also attracted attention beyond the participants themselves and was picked up by various agricultural media outlets, including Ekoland and Melkvee. This coverage helps bring the topic of calf-at-foot dairy to a wider audience and contributes to the ongoing discussion about animal welfare in the dairy sector.

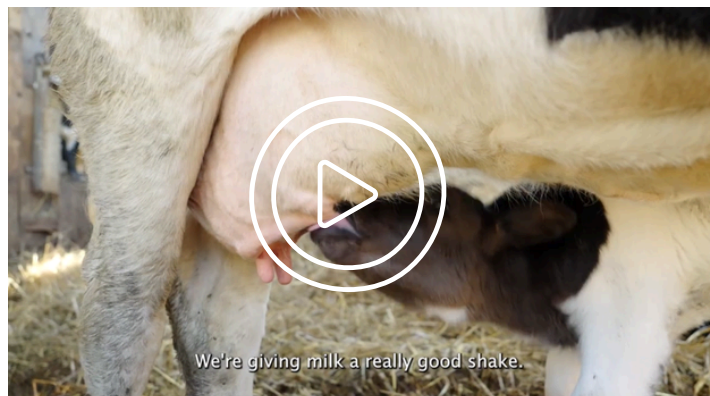
Below, you can find a selection of articles for those who want to read more.

- <https://www.ekoland.nl/artikel/1475966-kalveren-bij-de-koe-de-belangrijkste-lessen-van-boeren-wereldwijd/>
- <https://www.melkvee.nl/artikel/1480712-melkveehouder-gerjo-koskamp-kalf-bij-de-koe-is-een-relaxed-systeem-voor-koe-kalf-en-boer/>



Watch the Conference Film

If you want to relive the conference, you can also watch a **short film** that captures the highlights and atmosphere of the event. Aftermovie: <https://youtu.be/P8aOWh4BcGI>



Or the short videos of **Gerjo Koskamp from Boerderij Ruimzicht** <https://ap.lc/qNJKZ> or **John Arink from Biotel** <https://ap.lc/hMFTy>.

Making the Calf-at-Foot Conference Possible

Eyes on Animals and Kalverliefde organized the conference and gave as much financial input as we could, but we could never have done this alone! The following sponsors enabled us to make this conference so big and professional: The Barth Misset Foundation, De Dierenbescherming, CowManager, The Schweisfurth Stiftung and Caring Farmers. We are very grateful for your trust in our ability to organize this conference and for putting money into it. Sharing is caring, and together we are stronger!

The conference may be over, but the work continues. The exchange of knowledge is ongoing, and a growing community is staying connected—something we clearly heard is needed and valued. Do not hesitate to reach out to us should you have questions or need support!

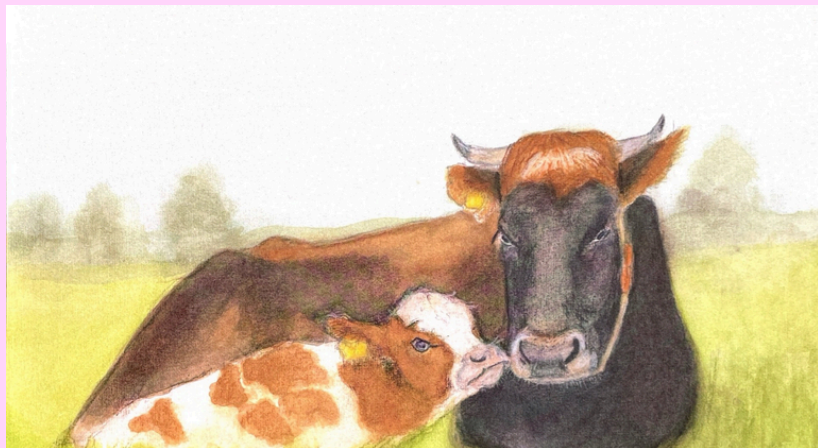
lesley@eyesonanimals.com - janina@kalver-liefde.nl



Calf-with-Cow Art

We would like to highlight and thank Dutch artist Cristel van Zundert, whose work has been featured in various books and galleries. For the Giving Milk a Good Shake conference, she created artworks that capture the quiet truth behind calf-at-foot dairy: cows and calves are social, gentle animals who thrive when they stay together—fostering trust, reducing stress, and supporting a system rooted in respect and reciprocity.

We used these cards to thank the speakers and participants for their contribution to the conference.



Who Are Eyes on Animals and Kalverliefde

Eyes on Animals (www.eyesonanimals.com) is a Netherlands-based animal welfare organization that operates internationally. The team consists of ethologists, veterinarians, animal husbandry specialists, and humane slaughter experts. They work to improve animal welfare during transport and slaughter through inspections, training, and the development of practical, humane solutions to welfare challenges across the livestock sector.

Kalverliefde (www.kalverliefde.nl) buys milk exclusively from Dutch calf-at-foot farms and rewards farmers with a financial premium for choosing a kinder dairy system. Kalverliefde dairy products are marketed as such and sold in large supermarkets across the Netherlands.



A Final Thank You!

Finally, we would like to thank everyone once again for being part of this Calf-at-Foot Dairy Conference. A special thank you to all speakers, participants, and the farms we had the opportunity to visit, for the time and effort you took to be involved.

Your openness, willingness to share experiences, and to keep exchanging ideas and inspiration are what make this movement grow.



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