

Dutch Dairy Farming and Dairy Industry

by Petra Jonkers

DAIRY farming has traditionally been a highly advanced sector of industry in the Netherlands. By developing and using innovative techniques and making the best possible use of existing circumstances, Dutch dairy farmers have turned the Netherlands into a leading export nation for agricultural products, despite its being one of the smallest and most densely populated countries in the world. Quality and safety for people, animals and the environment are the overriding concerns of dairy producers.

Grassland, Farmland and Succulent Meadows: The surface area of the Netherlands is 3.5 million hectares. Two million hectares of this is agricultural land, half of which is given over to grassland. Almost all of the grassland is used for dairy farming. The circumstances in which dairy farming takes place can vary sharply depending on the condition of the soil and the weather. Cows can graze in polders of clayey or peaty soil that lie below sea level, but they can also graze on higher lying sandy soil. Most cows graze in succulent meadows from April to October. Once in the shed they are usually fed silaged grass and cut maize along with mixed feed.

Family Farms and Specialisation: The 30,000 dairy farms in the Netherlands have a combined total of over 1.5 million dairy cows and are assigned an annual milk quota of 11 billion kilograms. One third of the dairy farms produce two thirds of the milk. Most of them are family farms, with know-how and skills being handed down from one generation to the next. The farmers and their family members do most of the work. By specializing, they are able to keep costs low and facilitate the process of mechanization and automation. Small mixed farms are going out of business and larger specialist farms are buying up their land. Mechanization, specialization and economies of scale are increasing the efficiency of dairy farming. The technical sophistication of the Dutch dairy industry makes it possible for dairy farms to compete in the international marketplace. The Dutch government's aim is for Dutch dairy farms to be competitive and earn as much of their income as possible in the commercial market.

Basis for the Holstein Friesian Breed: Historically the three most common breeds of cattle in the Netherlands were Friesian cattle, Meuse-Rhine-IJssel cattle and white-faced black cattle. The Friesian population was almost entirely black and white, with a very small percentage being red and white. The Meuse-Rhine-IJssel cattle are red and white. White-faced black cattle are divided into black-and-white and red-and-white populations. The Friesian is a world-famous breed. Friesian cows and bulls were already being sold in North America in the mid-19th century and provided the basis for the Holstein Friesian breed. The Netherlands now exports an annual total of 50,000 cattle around the world for breeding and dairy farming purposes, as well as thousands of embryos and 1.35 million samples of sperm. The main aim of breeding is to achieve a high level of milk and protein production by a healthy cow with a strong ud-

der, bone structure and hooves so as to ensure a long economic life. To achieve this aim, almost all dairy farmers make use of artificial insemination. A sixth of all artificial insemination procedures are conducted by the farmers themselves.

International Repute: The first herdbooks were established in the Netherlands more than a century ago. A national breeding society was founded in 1998 and has 38,000 members, dairy and meat cattle farmers. There are also several smaller co-operative and private breeding organizations. The predominantly co-operative structure allows the member dairy farmers to determine the breeding aim in the Netherlands for themselves. This results in cows and bulls with international reputations. Sunny Boy's two million samples of sperm made him the most in-demand bull of all time. His successors, Jabot, Celsius and Labelle, have demonstrated that Sunny Boy was not a mere lucky coincidence.

Animal Welfare: Consumers are becoming more demanding when it comes to animal welfare and cattle farmers are hence paying more attention to this issue than ever before. Government is also extremely interested in this topic. The relevant policy has taken the wishes expressed by society into account and also incorporates the results of research. Biotechnological procedures can now be performed on animals only after the Ministry of Agriculture has issued a permit specifically for that purpose. The use of hormones to stimulate growth and/or milk production is prohibited.

Research, Education and Information: Competence and know-how in the dairy farming sector and the dairy industry are encouraged by a notable combination of research, education, publicity and public information. Whether they are still in secondary school or at university young people studying agricultural science can elect to specialize in dairy farming or the dairy industry. They acquire practical experience at training centers and during periods of work placement. Dairy farmers make extensive use of public information aimed mainly at improving farm management and reducing environmental pollution. Wholesale purchasers of dairy and meat products, and in particular feed, seed, crop protection and fertilizer suppliers, provide information and guidance tailored to their product range. Interest groups, accounting firms and independent consultancies also offer information services. Dairy farms and the dairy industry have a broad range of trade media at their

disposal. News, know-how, publicity and useful information are also available on the Internet.

Innovation: Dutch farmers and market gardeners are eager to try the latest innovations. The excellence of Dutch dairy farms can be attributed to the close relationship between farmers, research institutes (especially the Institute for Environmental and Agricultural Technology or IMAG-DLO and the Practical Research Center for Cattle, Sheep and Horses, or PR), shed designers and the agricultural machinery industry. Several techniques that are now used worldwide were developed and first tried in the Netherlands. Almost all new dairy cattle sheds in the Netherlands are cubicle types. Both new and existing sheds give priority to welfare, environmental concerns and efficiency. New materials make for more comfortable bedding for the animals. The first computerized milking systems or milking robots were developed in the Netherlands and used for the first time on Dutch dairy farms. By now computerized milking systems are used on hundreds of Dutch farms to milk thousands of cows. Such systems not only make life easier for the farmer, but they also improve the quality of life for the cow, since grazing is still possible.

Identification and Registration: Every calf, cow and bull in the Netherlands has a unique identification number that it carries on its ear tag. Cattle farmers, dealers, butchers, chain management organizations, inspection agencies, the Animal Health Service, veterinary surgeons, breeding and artificial insemination organizations all use this number. It is linked to the Unique Farm Number of the farm that keeps

conducts random checks on these products and keeps a record of its findings. If a grower regularly supplies sub-standard products, he will face closer and more frequent checks.

When the clock strikes 6:30am, a loud gong announces that bidding is about to begin. There are five auction rooms: four for flowers and one for plants. In total, they seat 2,000 traders, who range from exporters and wholesalers to street traders. As soon as they have placed their electronic ID card in the slot by their seats, they are authorized to start bidding using the button on the desk in front of them. And since each room has three clocks - with three auctions taking place simultaneously - there is also a switch on each desk enabling the traders to shift from clock to clock.

the animal. Every delivery and receipt of cattle is reported to a central computerized register, so that every head can be tracked, even later. Births, supplies, removals and other such changes are reported electronically.

THE industry's turnaround time is short. Roses cut in a Dutch greenhouse early in the morning can be on sale in flower shops the same evening or early next day. Aalsmeer is the hub of an ingenious logistical network linking growers and traders worldwide. And its name is a hallmark for freshness and quality.

Around 70% of the plants and flowers sold at Aalsmeer come from growers in the provinces of North and South Holland. The rest come from elsewhere in the Netherlands and from Flanders and Germany. But growers in countries as far away as Spain, Israel, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Australia also use Aalsmeer as a launch pad to world markets. This gives the traders all-year access to an exhaustive range of products, including plants and flowers not grown in the Netherlands.

Aalsmeer Flower Auction is a cooperative, owned and run by the 4,000 growers who undertake to sell all their products there. In return, they have a guaranteed market and can rely on immediate payment for everything they sell. The costs of using the building and employing personnel are paid out of growers' membership fees and commission on sales.

Most of the flowers arrive at the auction-house cool rooms in the evening and during the night. Sorted by length, they are packed in buckets or boxes with their stems in water and placed on trolleys. Pot and garden plants undergo the same treatment during the day. The next morning, they are ready for the auctioneer's clock.

Hallmark
Before the plants and flowers are auctioned, a team of inspectors assesses their quality, checking whether they are too raw or too ripe, diseased, or damaged by greenfly or red spider mite. The inspectors also check their numbers, the

lengths of their stems, and whether their accompanying documents are in order. Every morning, around 10,000 trolleys are loaded with flowers and plants bearing the Aalsmeer quality mark.

To speed up this process, more and more growers are now inspecting their own products using the same strict criteria. Like the inspectors, the growers note any defects on the delivery note, which serves as a basis for the quality classification and price on the clock. They conduct the inspections in their own nurseries, so Aalsmeer has very early product information - with more and more of it arriving electronically. This means that many plants and flowers are ready for auction as soon as they arrive. The auction house

bring supply and demand together en masse, allowing the market's invisible hand to function most effectively: it also guarantees the grower the best price possible - which is essential given the perishability of the products. What is more, no other system can move so many consignments so fast: 1,500 per clock per hour.

Computer technology and electronic commerce are also gaining a firm foothold at Aalsmeer. Traders no longer have to be physically present in the auction room. They can now bid online - from an office at the auction house, from their own processing plant or even from home. Electronic bidding complements Aalsmeer's electronic information and ordering system, FlowerAccess, whereby

retailers can use the Internet to order plants and flowers from wholesalers.

From Grower to Vase - 18 Million Flowers a Day Aalsmeer Flower Auction Giving Color to the World

E-Bidding
The trolleys laden with flowers pass slowly in front of the clocks in a long, colorful procession. Consignments are sold by 'Dutch auction'. The lamps encircling each clock run backwards from 100 to one, or from the grower's top to bottom asking price. The first trader to press his button stops the clock and buys the consignment at the price displayed. The trader's knack is to press the button at exactly the right moment - not too early because that would be too expensive, and not too late because that would mean losing the consignment.

For more than 100 years, the auction clock has proved the most objective method of arriving at prices that accurately reflect value. Not only does it

conducts random checks on these products and keeps a record of its findings. If a grower regularly supplies sub-standard products, he will face closer and more frequent checks.

By Truck and Plane
Of the two million plants and 18 million flowers sold at Aalsmeer every day, around 20% stay in the Netherlands, 65% are sold in the rest of Europe, and 15% are exported to other continents. Auction-house personnel take the products from the trolleys and pack them in buckets, boxes, and containers. They also make up bouquets, which may consist of a mixture of flowers grown in the Netherlands, Israel, Africa, or South America. Then they move the products to the traders' trucks or warehouses, using the orange tractors belonging to Aalsmeer's internal transport system.

Tulips in Rome, chrysanthemums in Hong Kong, ferns in Sweden - all over the world you'll find plants and flowers sold at Aalsmeer Flower Auction. It's the biggest auction house of its kind anywhere, moving millions of products everyday from growers to domestic and foreign traders. Holland Horizon takes a look at this hub of the Dutch flower and plant industry.

Warmest felicitations to
Her Majesty Queen Beatrix
and the friendly people of The Netherlands
on the occasion of their
National Day



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House No 73, Road No 17A, Block-E
Banani, Dhaka-1213, Bangladesh
Tel: 9880840, 8826720, 8826302, Fax: 88-02-8823562
E-mail: classint@citechco.net



Water Security in the 21st Century

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the preparatory work for and discussions in The Hague, we will work within multilateral institutions, particularly the UN system, International Financial Institutions and bodies established by Inter-Governmental Treaties, to strengthen water-related policies and programmes that enhance water security, and to assist countries, as appropriate, to address the major challenges identified in this Declaration.

F. We call upon the Secretary General of the United Nations to further strengthen the coordination and coherence of activities on water issues within the UN system. We will adopt consistent positions in the respective governing bodies to enhance coherence in these activities.

G. We call upon the Council of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) to expand activities that are within the mandate of the GEF in relation to freshwater resources by catalysing investments in national water management issues that have a beneficial impact on international waters.

H. We welcome the contribution of the World Water Council in relation to the Vision and of the Global Water Partnership with respect to the development of the Framework for Action. We welcome follow-up actions by all relevant actors in an open, participatory and transparent manner that draws upon all major groups in society.

I. We note the statements (attached to this declaration) made by the representatives of the major groups and welcome them as a clear reflection of their readiness to work with us towards a secure water future for all.

8. Recognising that the ac-

tion referred to in paragraph 7, including progress on targets and strategies, are important and ambitious, we will review our progress periodically at appropriate fora, including the meeting in Bonn in 2002 and the 10-year review of the implementation of Agenda 21.

9. The Ministerial Conference acknowledges with appreciation that a range of issues were discussed during the Second World Water Forum, and that the Chair of the Forum presented these issues to the Ministerial Conference. The importance of these issues is unquestionable; we will raise them for further consideration in relevant fora in the future and will consider their implications for our individual national situations.

10. The challenges are formidable, but so are the opportunities. There are many experiences around the world that can be built on. What is needed is for us all to work together, to develop collaboration and partnerships, to build a secure and sustainable water future. We will, individually and acting together, strive to achieve this and stimulate and facilitate the contributions of society as a whole. To this end, we note with appreciation that pledges were made at The Hague (attached to our declaration). This Declaration reflects the determination of our governments and represents a critical step in the process of providing water security for all.

11. We, the Ministers and Heads of Delegation, thank the government and people of The Netherlands for their vision and for their hospitality in hosting this conference and forum.

Agreed to on Wednesday 22 March, 2000, in The Hague, The Netherlands.

SURFIN' HOLLAND

If you have access to the Internet and want to know more about the Netherlands, you can now surf on any of the following websites.

- Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs <http://www.minbuza.nl/english>
- Netherlands Foreign Trade Agency <http://www.hollandtrade.com>
- Netherlands Board of Tourism <http://www.visittheland.com>
- Royal Netherlands Embassy in Dhaka <http://www.citechco.net/netherlands>

On these websites you will find general information on the Netherlands, facts and figures about this country and its people, history, religion and geography. On the Foreign Trade Agency website you will find an online gateway to the Dutch economy and business. The site has been available for three years and receives about 400 visitors a day.

Heartiest felicitations on the Occasion of the National day of the Netherlands.

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SIMED INTERNATIONAL by.
St. Laurensdreef 22,
3506 GL Utrecht
The Netherlands
Tel: 31-30-265-2200, Fax: 31-30-261-8897
Internet: www.simed.simed.com
e-mail: simed@simed.com.

Representative in Bangladesh HEMA ENTERPRISES

99, Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue
Kawran Bazar Comm. Area
Dhaka-1215, Bangladesh.
Tel: 918-2068,913-2070, Fax: 880-2-9336596
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House # 55A, Road # 4A, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1209
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