

Tuning up sustainable organic animal production

Professor Lotta Rydhmer is an expert on animal breeding and genetics. In NJF-conference, she highlighted different perspectives and choices to make when tuning up organic animal production for more sustainable solutions.

An engine can be tuned up to run most efficiently. However, organic animal production is not one single engine to handle. When targeting for a more sustainable production, there is a need to consider various sustainability aspects with many goal conflicts.

- The first step is to admit the existing conflicts. All of them cannot be solved scientifically, they need some political decisions, Rydhmer emphasizes.

Researchers can highlight these conflicts and provide scientific bases for political decisions. For instance, how to get high profit in a short-term economic perspective and simultaneously reach high animal welfare. In an evaluation of 15 different pig production systems in Europe, production systems with higher pig welfare had worse farmers' economy in general.

Furthermore, there is a conflict between efficiency and climate impacts. In the Nordic countries, a high proportion of the consumed cattle meat is a "by-product" of milk production. A breeding resulting cows with high milk production leads to less cows and thus less meat. If we still want to consume the same amount of cattle meat, we have to increase the number of beef cows. In general, animal production with beef cattle has a larger climate impact than with dairy cattle.

- Dual-purpose breeds have a key role in organic production, and this example illustrates well the importance of studying the whole production system, Rydhmer states.

The organic production is sometimes discussed as one homogenous system. However, there is a huge diversity among producers, from small farms to bigger units. Different production systems have different challenges, and the farmers need different advisory support. For scientists, this means that different studies and research results are needed to improve the production systems.

- Regardless of differences between organic and conventional production systems, we should strive for continuous improvement and sustainability assessment practices, Rydhmer says.

As for the future, there are two alternative paths to follow according to Rydhmer. When thinking of merely marketing aspects, "tuning up" could mean more exclusive rules for organic production in order to maintain a large difference between organic and conventional production.

Seeing organic production as a way to sustainable development on a larger scale, these complicated rules may limit the number of organic farms. Hence, "tuning up" could be adapting the rules for organic production according to new scientific results, not letting the precautionary principle lead to dead ends.

- The choice between these future roads for organic production ought to be discussed within the organic movement, keeping the organic principles in mind, Rydhmer ends.

The article is based on the keynote speech given by professor Lotta Rydhmer at the international organic conference in Mikkeli, 19th of June, 2017. The conference gathered over 90 researchers from 13 countries to discuss the current research topics in organic farming sector.

- More information: www.njf.nu/seminars/mikkeli2017
- The conference material will be published in Organic ePrints: www.orgprints.org