

Revised Dairy Code of Practice: What does it mean for us?

Clemence Nash for *Progressive Dairy*

AT A GLANCE

The revised Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle will be integrated with proAction to reinforce consumer perceptions of Canadian dairy farmers as global leaders in animal care.

I am sure many in the industry are aware of the revised Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle available through the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) that launched last year. The revised code was developed through an intensive multiyear review by both a scientific committee and a code committee made up of an array of dairy stakeholders including producers, veterinarians, researchers, processors, animal welfare groups and more. The requirements within the revised code went into effect on April 1, 2024.

A large portion of the requirements within the revised code are already covered under the various modules of our proAction program in Canada; however, there are a few requirements that stand out as new and potentially impactful for dairy farmers. These include, but are not limited to: social housing of calves, gradual weaning, reduced stocking densities for freestalls, freedom of movement during calving and freedom of movement for mature cows in tiestall systems. For a complete list of requirements, I strongly suggest reading the revised code (www.nfacc.ca/codes-of-practice/dairy-cattle) directly and visiting the Dairy Farmers of Canada (DFC) website for additional resources (dairyfarmersofcanada.ca/en).

What some may not be aware of is how these changes will be incorporated into proAction and the value they bring to our industry.

Though the revised code requirements went live on April 1, this does not mean these requirements are live in proAction. It means these requirements now apply wherever the code is referenced in provincial or national legislation or milk board policies. For example, if an animal welfare complaint is lodged against a dairy farm and animal welfare inspectors must investigate, they will compare the farm's practices to those that are live in the revised code to determine how to move forward.

DFC intends to adopt the revised code requirements into the proAction program; however, these changes are not expected to be implemented until the fall of 2025 at the earliest. The proAction technical committees are currently reviewing the revised code to define how to validate these requirements. An example of the Animal Care Technical Committee's work

includes defining "physical contact" of calves in hutches. Is nose-to-nose contact adequate, or must they have full-body contact? These are the types of questions the committees are tackling before implementing the requirements into proAction.

So, what does this mean for Canadian dairy farmers beyond the obvious? I realize how much work this program can present to farmers, and how much it could cost some farms that will need to adapt their management and/or infrastructure to comply. It is important to remember that the new requirements are based on science that shows improvements in animal health and welfare, something most dairy farmers strive for, but also represent concerns from our industry's consumers. Social license is quickly becoming a nonnegotiable component of our marketplace given the growing presence of nondairy products like nut-based beverages. These new requirements offer evidence to consumers that dairy farmers hear their concerns and are prioritizing animal care.

"But wait, Clem. We don't even advertise proAction. How do they even know?"

Enter the Blue Cow.

You may have seen the Blue Cow in commercials, on social media or heard it mentioned on the radio. Created by DFC, it is a symbol recognizing dairy farmers' commitment to producing top-quality milk with high standards in animal care, food safety, milk quality, traceability, biosecurity and sustainable production.

What many don't realize is that Canadian Ad Standards – the regulations that control what can or cannot be said in advertising in Canada – mandate that anything said in an ad must be proven. DFC can prove many of its statements through, and because of, the nationally implemented proAction program. For example, when marketing campaigns include statements like, "Canadian dairy farmers follow high standards," DFC has proven this is the case due to compliance under proAction. This sets the Canadian dairy sector apart from many other livestock sectors. So, when you see a commercial referencing this logo, chances are high that the work done by farmers under the proAction program is what allows that commercial to exist and be heard or seen by people across Canada.

You may ask why DFC doesn't advertise the proAction program directly. A lot of thought was put into this decision. It comes down to brand confusion and brand dilution. If DFC were to advertise the logo and proAction program in separate campaigns, consumers may fall into assumptions that these are not the same programs for every dairy farm; they may assume some farms participate in programs and others do not or that some farms are "better" than others. They may even look for proAction logos instead of Blue Cow logos. You can see how

easily confusion can breed distrust. It is much safer, and much simpler, to package everything under the Blue Cow brand at the consumer and retailer level, and use the great work done under proAction to support and bolster its image.

Beyond domestic advertising, the proAction program, and the fact that it stays relevant and current through the incorporation of new codes and requirements, brings significant value to the Canadian dairy industry. The program is recognized by both the NFACC and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), providing key support from Canadian stakeholders like processors, retailers and consumers. Not only that, but with these changes the proAction program continues to position DFC as leaders in priority topics such as food safety, traceability and animal care, which has provided a strong position for dairy farmers to negotiate domestically and internationally in regulatory changes and trade agreements. This not only helps protect against encroachment into our market, but it could also allow opportunities in new markets through exports. Canadian dairy farmers are working to stay ahead of the curve of societal pressures relative to animal welfare, which allows us to be more agile and adaptive to new and emerging markets.

Yes, the revised code could mean more work and/or investment for some dairy farmers, but the results are well worth it, not only at the farm level, but at an industry level as well. It gives consumers confidence, our cows science-based practices for health and welfare, and allows us to have a strong voice domestically and internationally that says, we are leaders and we want to stay leaders. 🐄

Dr. Clém Nash holds a service contract with the Dairy Farmers of Canada. Through her work, she supports the dairy industry by implementing strong animal care training programs and creating a strategy around value-added services for dairy customers.



Clemence Nash

Senior Commercial Manager,
C.O.W.S Program

NOVUS

clemence.nash@novusint.com



Reprinted from June 2024