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# FARM 2028 Animal Care Stakeholder Survey Summary



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# Executive Summary

The kick off the development of FARM 2028, the National Dairy FARM Program's next version of its Animal Care and other program silos, a national stakeholder survey was conducted to gather input on the current Animal Care Program and identify opportunities for future improvement. The survey was designed to capture perspectives from across the dairy supply chain and to serve as one of several inputs informing program review and decision-making.

Opening July 21<sup>st</sup> 2025 and available for 7 weeks, the final survey response included 557 usable responses. Respondents represented a broad cross-section of roles, regions, and production systems. Overall, respondents recognized the role of FARM in supporting consumer confidence, market access, and industry-led assurance. At the same time, many expressed concern about administrative burden, perceived lack of direct on-farm benefit, and the need for greater clarity, consistency, and practicality in program requirements.

Stakeholders identified clear opportunities to strengthen FARM through a greater focus on animal-based outcomes, improved alignment with science and real-world conditions, reduced redundancy, and enhanced supports for producers and evaluators. These findings will be considered alongside committee review, scientific input, and additional engagement as FARM 2028 is developed.

## Introduction

The FARM Animal Care Program is reviewed and updated every three years to reflect evolving science, industry practices, and stakeholder expectations. As part of this process, FARM engages stakeholders to better understand perspectives on animal care priorities, program performance, and potential areas for refinement.

This stakeholder survey was conducted to inform early discussions related to the development of FARM 2028. The survey is one of multiple inputs that will be reviewed by FARM committees and governance bodies, including the Animal Care Task Force, Farmer Advisory Council, Animal Health and Well-Being Committee and the National Milk Producers Federation Board of Directors. It is intended to support informed discussion and decision-making rather than serve as a standalone directive for program changes.

# Survey Design and Participation

The survey was released publicly on July 21, 2025, following approval by the Animal Health and Well-Being Committee, and remained open for approximately seven weeks, closing on September 8, 2025. Responses were collected through an online survey platform and reviewed for completeness prior to analysis.

In total, more than 800 responses were received, with 557 responses meeting the criteria for inclusion in the final dataset. Respondents represented a range of stakeholder roles, including dairy producers and farm employees, veterinarians, cooperative and processor staff, industry organization representatives, and others. Responses were received from across U.S. regions and reflected a diversity of housing systems among producer respondents.

Survey responses were received from all major U.S. dairy regions, with the largest share of respondents located in the Midwest, representing approximately 72% of total responses. The Northeast accounted for about 27%, followed by the West at approximately 12%, the Southeast at about 7%, and the Southwest at approximately 6%. While responses were weighted toward the Midwest and Northeast, the geographic distribution indicates national participation and reflects input from regions that collectively represent the majority of U.S. dairy production, alongside perspectives from smaller but distinct regional contexts.

Among producer respondents, freestall housing was the most common system represented, accounting for approximately 75% of producer responses. Tie-stall systems represented about 14%, while pasture-based systems accounted for roughly 6%. Smaller proportions of respondents reported operating open lots (approximately 3%), stanchion barns (about 2%), or bedded pack or compost barn systems (approximately 3%). This distribution reflects the predominance of freestall housing in the U.S. dairy industry, while also capturing perspectives from a range of alternative housing systems that may face different operational and welfare considerations.

## Key Results

### Perceived Value of the FARM Program

#### Perceived Benefits of FARM for the Dairy Industry

Through roughly 400 responses, many respondents identified important benefits associated with the FARM Program. These included supporting consumer confidence and public trust, providing a nationally recognized and consistent framework for animal care expectations, demonstrating industry self-regulation, promoting continuous improvement, and maintaining market access.

### Concerns About On-Farm Value and Burden

At the same time, respondents raised concerns about the tangible value of the program for producers. Common themes from the 418 responses included concerns related to increased paperwork, added costs, and administrative burden without corresponding economic return. Some respondents expressed skepticism about the program's visibility to consumers and questioned whether FARM effectively builds public trust. Others characterized the program as overly driven by external expectations rather than producer realities.

These perspectives reflect broad patterns across the full set of 557 respondents, with similar themes appearing repeatedly across written comments throughout the survey. Together, they highlight an ongoing tension between the role of FARM as an assurance program designed to meet external expectations and the desire for clear, practical value at the farm level.

## Opportunities for Improvement | Program Design

Feedback in this section reflects synthesis across more than 200 individual written comments spanning multiple standards and general feedback areas.

- **Focus on Outcomes Rather Than Inputs:** Respondents frequently called for a stronger emphasis on animal-based measures to demonstrate welfare outcomes, rather than reliance on prescriptive inputs or documentation.
- **Transparency, Producer Voice, and Accountability:** There was interest in aligning verified compliance with meaningful incentives, such as market recognition or premiums, and in sharing aggregated benchmarks to demonstrate industry performance. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of transparency and producer involvement in standard development, including clearer communication about the scientific rationale behind requirements.
- **Stability, Streamlining, and Program Coherence:** Many respondents supported stronger accountability for critical standards, while also requesting greater stability and reduced frequency of program changes to allow farms time to adapt.

## Opportunities for Improvement | Standards & Operations

Feedback in this section draws from approximately 250 written comments associated with facility standards, animal-based observations, and management protocols.

- **Fit for Diverse Farm Types and Regions:** Feedback highlighted the need for standards that better reflect diversity across farm sizes, housing systems, and regions, rather than one-size-fits-all requirements.
- **Science Review and Risk-Based Thresholds:** Respondents expressed interest in reassessing certain metrics using current evidence and risk-based approaches.
- **Consistency, Calibration, and Follow-Up:** Consistency in evaluation was a recurring theme, with stakeholders stressing the importance of evaluator training, calibration, and timely follow-up on corrective actions.

## Opportunities for Improvement | Supports

Support-related feedback reflects roughly 150 written comments, often overlapping with standards-related concerns but explicitly framed around tools, training, and communication needs.

- **Training That Supports Implementation:** Many respondents emphasized the need for practical, accessible training resources, including bilingual materials, that support implementation rather than compliance alone.
- **Digital Tools and Integrated Recordkeeping:** Respondents encouraged development of digital tools or portals to streamline documentation, reporting, and recordkeeping.
- **Communication and Advisor Alignment:** Clear and timely communication about program purpose, updates, and expectations was viewed as essential to building trust and increasing buy-in among producers.

## Feedback on Specific Standards

Of the 557 respondents included in the analysis, 63% (350 respondents) chose to provide additional written comments on specific standards. Most individual standards received between 15 and 30 comments. For the purposes of analysis, emphasis was placed on constructive feedback that offered actionable insight into program design, standards, and implementation. The key groups of standards with most constructive feedback are described below.

## Administrative and Documentation Requirements

Administrative standards generated some of the highest volumes of written feedback across the survey. Respondents frequently questioned the value of requirements related to Cow Care Agreements, continuing education documentation, veterinary client–patient relationship and herd health plan sign-offs, treatment records, and meat and milk residue oversight. Common concerns included redundancy with existing regulatory or processor requirements, excessive paperwork, and limited perceived impact on actual animal care outcomes. Small and family-run farms, in particular, noted that annual signatures and detailed documentation requirements often felt misaligned with how care is delivered on farms where owners or long-term staff perform most animal care tasks. While some respondents supported the intent of these standards, support was often conditional on greater flexibility, longer renewal intervals, or stronger integration with veterinary oversight rather than standalone forms.

This subsection reflects approximately 360 written comments spanning Cow Care Agreements, Continuing Education, VCPR and Herd Health Plan standards, Treatment Records, and Meat and Milk Residues.

## Facility and Management Standards

Facility and management standards were frequently characterized by respondents as reflecting basic husbandry practices that are already part of day-to-day farm management. Feedback commonly emphasized frustration with requirements perceived as obvious or overly prescriptive, particularly where documentation was required for conditions that respondents felt were best evaluated through direct animal observation. Across standards related to feed and water access, daily exercise, housing conditions, transport fitness, milking procedures, pest control, and biosecurity, respondents requested clearer definitions of terms such as adequate, appropriate, and sufficient, which were viewed as subjective and inconsistently applied. Many also emphasized the need for flexibility to reflect differences in climate, housing design, herd size, and regional production systems, alongside greater reliance on outcome-based assessment rather than fixed inputs.

This feedback draws from approximately 295 written comments across facility observations, exercise, feed and water access, transport fitness, milking, pest control, and biosecurity-related standards.

## Pre-Weaned Calf Care

Standards related to pre-weaned calf care prompted detailed feedback focused primarily on timing, practicality, and recognition of diverse management systems. Respondents generally supported the importance of colostrum management, milk feeding, access to water and starter feed, and pain mitigation for procedures, but frequently questioned

prescriptive timelines such as fixed hour or day thresholds. Many noted that requirements did not always reflect realities such as pasture calving, nighttime births, cold weather conditions, cow-calf contact systems, or high-milk feeding programs. Feedback also highlighted a desire for clearer guidance on definitions and measurement, particularly for concepts such as adequate volume or quality of feed, and for flexibility that allows producers to demonstrate good outcomes through animal condition rather than strict adherence to uniform protocols.

This subsection reflects approximately 194 written comments across calf movement, colostrum, water access, milk feeding, starter feeding, disbudding, and pain control.

### Animal-Based Observations

Animal-based measures generated some of the most detailed and technically focused feedback in the survey. Respondents broadly supported the use of animal-based outcomes such as body condition, lameness, and tail condition as meaningful indicators of welfare. However, concerns were raised about the appropriateness of certain benchmarks, the treatment of small herds where a small number of animals can disproportionately affect results, and the length of time allowed to address corrective actions. Evaluator consistency and scoring subjectivity were recurring issues, with respondents noting variation across evaluators, regions, and assessment conditions. Many emphasized that while outcome-based measures are valuable, their credibility depends on clear definitions, consistent application, and corrective action timelines that reflect both welfare urgency and practical feasibility.

This subsection reflects approximately 107 written comments related to body condition, lameness, and injured tail observations.

## Cross-Cutting Themes

Cross-cutting themes capture issues that were raised repeatedly across multiple standards and topic areas, rather than being limited to feedback on any single requirement. These themes synthesize recurring input drawn from more than 500 written comments spanning nearly all sections of the survey, highlighting common priorities and concerns that cut across the program as a whole.

- **Outcome-Based Measures as a Credibility Anchor:** Across topics, respondents emphasized the importance of animal-based, outcome-focused measures supported by sound science.
- **Administrative Burden and Redundancy:** Concerns about paperwork, duplication, and administrative load were raised consistently, particularly where requirements overlapped with existing regulatory or processor oversight.

- **Flexibility Across Systems and Scale:** Respondents stressed that standards must accommodate variation in farm size, housing type, climate, and management approach to remain practical and credible.
- **Evaluator Consistency and Program Trust:** Consistency and clarity in evaluation were viewed as central to program trust, with repeated calls for improved training, calibration, and alignment across evaluators.
- **From Compliance to Support:** Many respondents expressed a desire for FARM to function not only as a compliance framework but also as a source of practical support, tools, and continuous improvement guidance.

## How These Results Will Be Used

The results of this survey will be reviewed by FARM leadership and several committees within NMPF's governance process as part of the broader FARM 2028 development process. Survey findings will be considered alongside scientific review, committee deliberations, and additional stakeholder engagement.

The survey is intended to inform discussion, identify priorities, and highlight areas of alignment and concern. Final decisions regarding program updates will be made through established FARM governance processes, with the goal of maintaining a credible, practical, and science-informed animal care assurance program for the U.S. dairy industry.