

***EGF Symposium 2015, Wageningen, The Netherlands  
Grassland and forages in high output dairy farming systems***

**Conference synthesis**

Introduction

The 2015 EGF conference is coming to an end and it is now my pleasure to draw some conclusions.

Was the conference successful or not? Was it worth having attended it?

If I was only allowed to give a speed synthesis like the speed presentations ('...5 seconds left, come to the conclusion...') I would say:

My perception of the conference is, yes, it was successful, yes, it was worth having attended it. But of course, this might not be very convincing, so there is a need to justify this appraisal. And I am lucky as I was not given a strong time limitation by the organizers to do this. Last not least there will be a discussion on the synthesis which I am looking forward to.

A conclusion is inherently biased, it's a fast and preliminary assessment.

I am not going too far into the details of the scientific work here and I am not going to refer to names.

The topic/the agenda

The scope of a symposium is smaller than that of a General Meeting. This symposium had chosen an adequate topic, all contributions stuck to the topic and, yet, the conference got a reasonably high number of delegates.

The opening session made it clear: Grassland and dairying is a global issue. 1 Mio dairy farms in Europe, farming 50 Mio ha of land, producing a quarter of the world's milk production.

But it is not only about milk production, it is about human nutrition and health, about animal welfare and about the inherited environmental goods (such as biodiversity).

Meeting these goals means to take the right decisions at the local scale. Thus, think globally – act locally also applies for our business.

This perception of the topic shows that grassland and dairying is not only a production issue, it strongly affects society. By the way, the topic of the 1994 General Meeting in Wageningen which I would like to remind you to, was chaired by Len 't

Mannetje, the former grassland Professor at Wageningen University, the topic was 'Grassland and Society'. Wasn't this a very forward looking title at that time? There was a discussion whether we would contribute to the solution of feeding the billions. I have to admit that I was critical with this statement. But I think I agree when at the same time we were able to reduce the shadow forage area outside Europe and this is a challenge.

### The science

There was the statement by Frans Aarts at the very beginning of the conference: We should be aware of our duties as scientists. Scientists are servants of society. I am not sure whether this is the whole story. I would definitely add, scientists serve science. As grassland scientists we have to contribute to the body of knowledge itself. Mind you that science is the systematic enterprise that builds and organizes knowledge in the form of testable explanations and predictions.

A basic part of science is to be absolutely clear about terms and definitions and about methodology. We had an extended discussion on terms and definitions, which I found necessary and also inspiring. What is intensive dairying? Where are the system boundaries? What are the resources and how is their nature? What is efficiency?

What was the content of the scientific discussion:

The three main sessions addressed the whole set of issues:

- (1) the variety of milk production in Europe, was shown to be huge, in particular between the different countries but also within countries, of which a prominent example was given by Portugal
- (2) grasslands and crops, our core business,
- (3) efficiency and environmental impact with a focus on eco-efficiency and measuring performance and sustainability.

Within this framework, we were able to assess current processes, asking where things go into the right or wrong direction. We were able to identify the major achievements of grassland research but also the major challenges. These were summarized as increasing competitiveness, improving resource efficiency, enhancing environmental performance and sustaining social responsibility. The referring topics

were feed supply, animal health, nutrient management, consumer perception and socio economic issues.

We were extensively demonstrated the generally high level of research in our community. We are having the methodology, we are offering innovations and solutions and we have seen many nice pieces of this every day work in the many posters and presentations.

If I compare this meeting with a meeting let's say 20 years ago, I got the impression that within our community, we are now much better interlinked and the various activities throughout Europa form a much more general picture. A good proof for this is the fact that we have been increasingly successful in European research funding. We are now strong in this respect, also if we compare with other scientific disciplines. By the way, I recommend that you take a closer look at the conference proceedings. It's worth doing so. The book is of a high standard. It is well revised and edited. I would be happy if this development of good science throughout and good linkages would be underpinned by increasing efforts for publications in highly visible scientific journals.

### The organisation

I can keep this short. The conference was extremely well organised, very efficient and professional. In his speed presentation, Luc Delaby stated that the art of grazing is anticipating. As an analogue, I would say the art of organising a conference is anticipating. I know from own experiences, that's exactly what it is. Everything seemed to work out very well. There was no obvious failure, or, if so, it was effectively kept under cover, which is fine.

The organisers are not only innovative in grazing; they are also innovative in conference technologies. The speed presentations – once the audience and the speakers got used to it – proved to be a good way of increasing the significance of all the good work being presented in the posters. A speed presentation is an appetizer, the audience is able to connect a topic with a face and this ensures an efficient transfer of knowledge and ideas thereafter.

I also like the idea of using new media like twitter and what's app to better involve the audience in the discussion. Maybe that the average age of the audience is not young

enough to have it fully adopted from the start. We should keep an eye on this innovation.

### The atmosphere

Good science and people being in good mood is a prerequisite for a successful conference. I have been to conferences of various scientific communities and I have to say that there is something special with the grassland people. We tend to refer to the grassland family meaning people being related in some way. This, in general, makes it easy going for organisers of grassland conferences. But, of course, it can't be taken for granted, it has to be maintained and further developed. This conference was a good example how this can be done successfully: First of all, good science makes people feel happy. Then, there were nice people from the host country, being very determined and motivated to make delegates feel comfortable. And finally, a suitable venue, a genuine place for the topic, and a colourful programme apart from lectures and posters is of overriding importance.

I would like to thank the organisers, Agnes van den Pol-van Dasselaar and Frans Aarts as the scientific mastermind, Marcia Stienezen and Jeroen Nolles for the great organisation and all the others involved which I am not going to name. It was a great conference.

In the opening session, we were demonstrated the magic of turning grass, a marginal resource into milk, a highly valuable food. I like this image, but as a scientist, I would like to remove the magic and understand the processes behind it. So let's go on researching and meet elsewhere next time, e.g. on the occasion of another EGF conference.

Johannes Isselstein