

Farm Practices in B.C. Reference Guide

Strengthening Farming Program



Ministry of
Agriculture
and Food

FACTSHEET

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COMMODITY: DAIRY

Description

The British Columbia dairy industry produces over 846 million litres of milk annually. Milk is processed in licensed dairy plants and subsequently sold to consumers and other milk product users. The industry manages about 80,400 milking cows and an equivalent number of dairy replacement animals distributed across licensed dairy farms in seven production regions. The average milking herd size is approximately 183 cows. About 76% of the province's milk is produced in the Fraser Valley, whereas the Okanagan–Shuswap and Vancouver Island regions account for 17% and 6% of total production, respectively. Other smaller production areas include the Bulkley Valley, the Kootenays, the Cariboo and the Peace River.

The B.C. dairy industry is represented by two organizations: the BC Milk Marketing Board (BCMMB) and the BC Dairy Association (BCDA). Each organization serves a separate role in the industry. The *BC Natural Products Marketing Act* gives the BCMMB the authority to ensure that industry is compliant with all legislation and regulations. The BCMMB also manages total BC milk production through producer quota allocations. The BCDA provides a lobbying vehicle for B.C. producers by presenting industry issues and concerns to the provincial government and to federal authorities through its membership in the Dairy Farmers of Canada. The Association also encourages fluid milk consumption through numerous program initiatives.

Under the *BC Milk Industry Act*, dairy farms are subject to regular inspections to ensure that operators work in an environment that promotes safe and clean milk production and handling practices. Farmers must also provide adequate animal housing and waste handling facilities. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food oversees farm licensing and inspection, raw milk handling and milk testing, as well as the licensing of bulk tank milk graders and milk truck inspections.

The *BC Milk Industry Act* also grants authority to the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC), an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA), to inspect dairy processing plants and to conduct finished product evaluations. With respect to federally licensed dairy plants, inspections are primarily delegated to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA).

Cows are milked two to three times per day in milking parlour facilities or robotic milking systems. In robotic systems cows can be milked more frequently, typically at intervals of approximately six hours. Most milking system packages currently offer technologies that monitor individual cow behaviour around the clock and generate reports that dairy operators use to manage all aspects of milk quality, cow health and herd performance. Scheduled servicing of milking equipment performance is critical to efficient operation that minimizes stress on herd health. A series of standard spot checks are conducted at each milking to ensure proper equipment performance and sanitation.

Dairy replacement animals vary in age from birth to about two years. Heifers are typically raised to produce their first calves at ages ranging from 22–26 months (about 2 years). A typical lactating cow, reproductively managed to give birth every 12–13 months, produces an average of 30–33 litres of milk per day for 10–11 months, after which it is dried off for a rest period of six to eight weeks before giving birth again.

Dairy cows are fed forages such as grass silage, corn silage, hay, and pasture to provide a highly digestible source of fiber, energy, and protein. British Columbia producers grow much of their own forages on their own farms or on leased land located nearby. Concentrates in the form of grain mixes are typically purchased and fed at varying amounts according to production levels either through computer feeders or incorporated into a total mixed ration (TMR) diet which includes all necessary forages. Mixes include energy-rich cereal grains such as barley and corn, commercial fats, and high-quality supplements comprising proteins, minerals, and vitamins.

In addition to milk production, dairy operations are a major source of meat resulting from animals of all ages being culled and marketed for such reasons as low milk production, poor reproductive performance, and poor body confirmation. Dairy bull calves are typically sold at local auction marts or directly to farms that raise them for veal or beef. It is a growing practice to breed low genetic/productive cows to beef breeds resulting in increased value to the crossbred calf when compared to a traditional dairy male calf.

Manure is spread on the farm's own or leased land at agronomic rates to improve soil fertility. Manure must be stored during the winter for a minimum of three months for regions of the province with high precipitation.

The commodity factsheet on Forage in this reference guide contains useful related information as well.

See also Commodity: [Forage](#)

Farm Practices of Particular Interest

Practices for specific farm activities can be found in the Farm Practices section of this reference guide. Farm practices of interest to dairy production include the following:

Cattle Handling and Transportation

Producers are responsible for ensuring that the behavioural, health and welfare needs of their animals are met. Prompt medical treatment, good housing, and cleanliness all play a role in this goal. In 2023, the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) – in cooperation with the Dairy Farmers of Canada (DFC) – published an updated version of the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle. Producers are advised to refer to the Code for best management practices in subject areas such as housing, handling facilities, feed and water practices, health and welfare management, transportation, husbandry practices, and euthanasia.

B.C. dairy farmers are required to participate in proAction which is based on the National Farm Animal Care Council Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle. ProAction is Dairy Farmer's of Canada's national on-farm quality assurance program of six pillars: milk quality, food safety, animal care, livestock traceability, biosecurity, and environment.

All dairy animal handlers, including producers, livestock transporters and auction mart staff should seek training and certification in best management practices for animal handling and movement. Comprehensive materials are now available through Animal Health Canada's (AHC) Certified Livestock Transport (CLT) courses (Livestock or Poultry) which focuses on Canadian Food Inspection Agency regulations, transport laws, livestock handling, animal and handler safety, biosecurity, and accident prevention.

The AHC program is a comprehensive training course and support service for livestock and poultry transporters, shippers, and receivers. CLT is an easily accessible, standardized online program offering humane animal transportation certification that is

recognized throughout Canada and the United States. CFIA's Health of Animals Regulations requires commercial carriers to be trained and have proof of training in the humane handling and transporting of livestock.

Producers must incorporate adequate space on their farm properties to accommodate the volume, movement and parking of all vehicles associated with farm activities.

See also Farm Practice: [Animal Care and Handling](#)
[Transportation](#)

Cultivation

Dairy production requires the utilization of many different forage and crop species including but not limited to annual and perennial forages and silage corn.

See also Farm Practice: [Cultivation](#)
[Mobile Equipment](#)

Farm Buildings and Equipment

Dairy producers require structures to house livestock; to store feeds, fertilizers, and pesticides; to hold waste; and to protect and maintain machinery and equipment. Some odours can be expected to be generated from buildings that house livestock. More concentrated odours result from manure storage facilities during times of agitation and while spreading waste onto fields. Best practices for manure management help to control fly populations, reduce concentrations of odours, and ensure maximum utilization of the nutrient value of manure by-products.

See also Farm Practice: [Storage of Hazardous Material](#)
[Ventilation](#)
[Pest Management](#)

Feeding

The majority of forages used by dairy operations are grown, harvested, and stored on the farm. Some dairies purchase medium-sized to large-sized square bales of alfalfa hay from other regions or provinces as sources of high-quality fiber. Concentrates and protein supplements are primarily purchased from local feed companies and kept in large storage bins or commodity sheds. Handling, mixing and provision of specially formulated rations to animals to satisfy growth and milk production requirements are typically designed and implemented on the farm following regular consultations with qualified feed nutritionists.

See also Farm Practice: [Feeding and Watering](#)
[Stationary Equipment](#)
[Storage of Farm Supplies and Products](#)

Fertilizer Use

Inorganic fertilizers are often stored temporarily until cropping and weather conditions permit field application.

See also Farm Practice: [Storage of Hazardous Material](#)

Grazing

For dairy farms incorporating grazing practices, cattle can be pastured 24 hours a day throughout the growing season. It is more common, however, to manage cattle on a mixed feeding system in which they graze in fields only during daylight hours. Most producers keep their cattle within buildings year-round.

See also Farm Practice: [Feeding and Watering](#)

Machinery Operation

The operation of equipment for feeding is common practice on dairy farms and usually includes tractors and wagons for loading and mixing, electrically powered augers for grain bin unloading, and in some cases stationary mechanical systems along feed bunks. It is common for automated systems to run at any time of day, depending on demand. Depending on the region, silage or hay production can be undertaken up to 5 times per year, lasting for several days. During times of electrical power outage, standby power generation equipment may also be necessary for extended periods.

See also Farm Practice: [Mobile Equipment](#)
[Stationary Equipment](#)
[Feeding and Watering](#)

On-Farm Cooling, Storage, and Equipment Sanitation

Milk is usually removed from a dairy farm every two days by a licensed bulk milk grader, and each dairy farm must have adequate refrigerated milk storage to accommodate their level of production. In some cases, a farm will have additional capacity for storing milk should unforeseen circumstances such as inclement weather prevent a tanker from being available at scheduled collection times. Bulk milk tanks must be checked for proper calibration once every five years, must have adequate refrigeration capability to be able to maintain milk temperatures within a range of 1° C to 4° C between milkings, must not allow blended temperatures to exceed 10° C during milking time, and must be capable of reducing the milk temperature to less than 4° C within one hour of the end of milking.

Some B.C. dairy farms process their own milk in licensed processing facilities on their premises for subsequent sale and distribution to consumers. Producers must have a strong working knowledge of equipment function, routine and scheduled maintenance procedures, and cleaning and sanitation protocols.

See also Farm Practice: [Product Processing](#)
[Stationary Equipment](#)

Mortalities

Good practices associated with mortality disposal vary, depending on cause of death, local climate, and surrounding land use. If mortalities are to be disposed of off the farm of origin, Specified Risk Material (SRM) permits must be in place for all related disposal activities, including transport and final disposal.

SRM are cattle tissues which may harbour the prions related to bovine spongiform encephalopathy, also known as mad cow disease. Stringent federal regulations govern all SRM management and are an important part of the food safety system to assure trading partners that Canadian meat products are safe to export.

SRM is exempt from federal regulations if the mortality does not leave the farm of origin. However, on-farm disposal of SRM is subject to the Code of Practice for Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM Code). The AEM Code allows for burial and composting of SRM. The fields to which the SRM compost is applied cannot be used to grow crops for human consumption or graze domestic ruminants.

See also Farm Practice: [Composting](#)
[Mortality Disposal](#)

Waste Products and Manure Handling

Manure is collected and stored or composted until it can be applied to cropland as a fertilizer. Some odours will be generated from waste agitation and land spreading. Manure storage and use on cropland must be done according to requirements in the Code of Practice for Agricultural Environmental Management. All waste and potentially damaging products must be disposed of in an environmentally sound manner.

See also Farm Practice: [Composting](#)
[Farmstead Refuse](#)
[Fertilizers and Soil Conditioners](#)
[Manure Storage and Use](#)
[Pesticides](#)

Principal and Accessory Buildings

From an operational perspective, principal farm buildings on dairy farms are typically the milk house and milking facilities, livestock housing barns, holding pens, and feeding areas. Accessory farm buildings may include storage for agricultural wastes, equipment, chemicals, compost input materials, compost products, hay, grain, wood waste and silage. Silage can be stored in towers, in horizontal concrete or wood bunkers, and in plastic bags. Other accessory structures could include confined livestock areas, machine sheds, on-farm composting buildings, processing facilities, or direct farm marketing buildings.

From a watercourse protection perspective, however, the definition of principal and accessory buildings may differ. For the purposes of determining applicable setbacks from watercourses and property lines, local government bylaws or the Guide for Bylaw Development in Farming Areas should be consulted. Building assessments may need to be conducted on a case-by-case basis if the designation of a building as principal or accessory is unclear.

Legislation

Agricultural producers are expected to follow all legislation that pertains to their farming operations. The provincial *Farm Practices Protection (Right to Farm) Act* stipulates that a “farm operation” must meet the *Public Health Act*, *Integrated Pest Management Act*, *Environmental Management Act* and the regulations under those Acts, as well as any land use regulation (amongst other requirements), to be protected from liability in nuisance, from being prevented from conducting that farm operation by court order, and from the application of certain local government bylaws. Local government bylaws may also apply to some farm practices, and farmers affected should contact their relevant local government for more information.

Some of the Acts, regulations, and bylaws that may be relevant to this topic may include the following:

Federal Legislation

The *Fisheries Act* protects fish and fish habitat in ditches, streams, rivers and wetlands and prohibits the discharge of deleterious substances such as fertilizers, manure and pesticides into watercourses frequented by fish, or that may end up in water frequented by fish. It also prohibits the harmful alteration, disruption or destruction of “fish habitat”.

The *Safe Food for Canadians Act* regulates “food commodities”, including their inspection, labelling, advertising, and safety, and their import, export and interprovincial trade. It provides the establishment of standards for food commodities, the registration and licensing of persons who perform certain activities related to them, and registration of and standards for establishments where those activities are performed.

The *Health of Animals Act* protects human and animal health through the control or elimination of reportable diseases and toxic substances, governs humane treatment of animals, including humane transport of all animals, and enables regulatory control of “Specified Risk Material” (SRM) (Health of Animals Regulation Part I.1) from cattle to ensure that it is removed from the feed system.

Provincial Legislation

The *Animal Health Act* provides statutory authority to the province to limit the spread of environmental toxins, infestations, syndromes and transmissible diseases.

The *Environmental Management Act* protects land, water and air environments from “pollution” and “waste”, and regulates the handling and disposal of hazardous materials. Below is a list of some of the regulation(s) under this Act:

- The Code of Practice for Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) applies to all “agricultural operations” in British Columbia, from small hobby farms to large commercial operations and, among other things, regulates the storage and use of manure and other agricultural by-products, and allows farmers to operate without a waste permit in certain circumstances when storing and managing mortalities, manure, or other byproducts and managing agricultural composting operations.

The *Food and Agricultural Products Classification Act* Organic Certification Regulations establishes an organic certification program in B.C., overseen by the Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia. This program allows farmers to obtain certification to demonstrate that the food and agricultural products which they produce or that the practices which they follow in the production and selling of these products are in accordance with prescribed organics standards.

The *Food Safety Act* and the Meat Inspection Regulation govern animal slaughter and the sale of meat and meat products.

The *Milk Industry Act* and the Milk Industry Standards Regulation govern production, inspections, storage, transportation, processing and sale of milk and milk byproducts.

The Act requires that all milk, except for raw milk used in the production of certain cheeses, is pasteurized.

The *Motor Vehicle Act* and Motor Vehicle Act Regulation protect people traveling on public roads, in part by regulating hazards – including the operation and movement of farm equipment, implements, vehicles, and animals on public roads. The Act requires that loads must be securely fastened and/or sealed to prevent loss during shipment.

The *Natural Products Marketing (BC) Act* and British Columbia Milk Marketing Board Regulation provide the regulatory structure for the supply management of milk in the province. They enable marketing boards and commissions to promote, control and regulate the production, transportation, packing, storage and marketing of milk and milk products in British Columbia. The Regulation establishes the B.C. Milk Marketing Board and further defines its powers.

The *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* prohibits persons responsible for animals from causing, permitting or allowing the animals to be in distress. The Act empowers the BC Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BC SPCA) to intervene if animals are in distress. In this context, an animal is in distress if it is:

- deprived of adequate food, water, shelter, ventilation, light, space, exercise, care or veterinary treatment
- kept in conditions that are unsanitary
- not protected from excessive heat or cold
- injured, sick, in pain or suffering, or
- abused or neglected.

Under the Animal Care Codes of Practice Regulation, the National Farm Animal Care Council Codes of Practice are established as reasonable and generally accepted practices in keeping and handling certain animals.

Local Government

Applicable local government powers may include animal control bylaws.

Publications

Publications providing information on dairy cattle production include the following:

[*British Columbia Agricultural Composting Handbook*](#)

[*British Columbia Environmental Farm Plan Reference Guide*](#)

British Columbia Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Guide
British Columbia Good Agricultural Practices Guide – Milk Practices
Milking Centre Design and Construction for Parlour Milking
Canadian Quality Milk (CQM) in British Columbia
Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle
Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Veal Calves
Fly Control for Dairy Barns
Guide for Bylaw Development in Farming Areas
Large Animal Disposal – On-Farm Composting Option, South Coastal Region of BC
On Farm Composting in British Columbia (Section 3.3 Composting Deadstock)
Riparian Management
Siting and Management of Dairy Barns and Operations