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Health monitoring concepts for long-term improvement of dairy health

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Standardized recording of animal health data is prerequisite for reliable analyses across farms and measures to systematically lower disease incidences in the population. For cattle, the central key for health data recording has been set up as comprehensive reference allowing health monitoring (HM) with input from multiple sources of different expertise. Available infrastructure is not yet broadly used though in the German dairy sector, mainly because of lacking HM concepts that combine practical feasibility with short- and long-term benefits for management and breeding. Experiences from regional projects (GKuh: 2010-2012, 18.500 females / 57 farms; THU: 2009-2012, 55.000 females / 21 farms) with heterogeneous farm structures and implementation conditions were used to synergistically develop an integrated system for routine HM in German dairy farms. Recording by farmers via herd management software focused on disease diagnoses, with optional extension by health-related observations and measures. Interfaces made the system flexible with regard to additional input from e.g. claw trimmers and laboratories. All health data, relating to 24.500 (GKuh) and 241.000 (THU) diseases, were transferred to the central health data base with restrictive access rights to ensure data security. Management-oriented analyses included within-farm statistics and comparisons with regional averages, with individualized format of health reports according to the herd-needs (stand-alone HM protocol or supplement to already established within-farm analyses). Complete data from HM herds, including animal movements, performance and pedigree records, were used for genetic analyses. In the combined dataset, 2.219 sires were represented (6% with > 50 daughters) implying improved conditions for genetic evaluations and selection for health traits in dairy cattle.