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## **‘Animal feeding and animal welfare are closely interlinked’ – Interview with Dr Antje Eckel, CEO of Dr. Eckel Animal Nutrition**

*The global demand for protein is increasing. How are the protein demand of a growing world population and animal nutrition related? How can feeding improve animal welfare and health? And can the use of antibiotics and medicine in animal production be reduced through feeding? Dr Antje Eckel, CEO of Dr. Eckel Animal Nutrition GmbH & Co. KG and animal nutrition expert, answers these and other questions in an interview.*

**Protein is an essential component of human and animal nutrition. The global demand for protein is increasing, while eating habits in some countries are changing dramatically. How do you think the overall protein demand will develop in the future?**

Some regions of the world have a surplus of protein while others have a deficiency. Around nine per cent of the world’s population still experiences hunger. That is around 700 million people. This figure is expected to grow by another 60 million in the next five years. Our goal must be to counteract this. In order to do this, we need a sensible mix of protein sources: plant protein, meat substitutes, cultured meat and animal protein such as that found in meat, egg and milk. The decisive factor is production: food that is not produced sustainably has no future.

We are aware that consumer behaviour vis-à-vis animal protein will change: high-quality products will have greater value. Previous generations in Germany grew up in a time of scarcity, where meat was consumed no more than once a week. These



generations had the need to make up for this situation. This need no longer exists. Today, we have to think global and reason things out responsibly. What do I eat and where does it come from? Europe will lead the way: we will consume less animal protein but of higher quality.

And promoting animal welfare at all levels will be a matter of course. We are also already intensively discussing the issue of animal welfare with customers in developing countries, particularly in Asia. This, despite the fact that many countries still need to catch up in terms of protein supply. In Kenya, egg prices are strongly influenced by the labour market, which goes to show how great the population's protein demand is. And in Malaysia, school meals serve to provide all children with enough protein to foster brain development. These are scenarios that we can no longer conceive of in Europe.

So we will continue to see an increase in animal protein consumption in developing countries, but not to the extent of the consumption in Europe or North America. Globalisation also means harmonisation: some consume more, others less; we just have to meet in the middle. This holds just as true for animal protein.

### **What is the role of animal nutrition in this regard?**

Feed consumption will increase globally, even if less meat is consumed in some affluent countries. This is pertinent to both consumers and farmers, because about 70 per cent of the costs in livestock production are feed costs. Production is becoming increasingly regional, of higher quality and more sustainable. Consequently, greater demands will be placed on animal nutrition. Feeding is critical when it comes to making more out of less. Our global resources are limited. If the population is growing and we want to provide healthy nutrition, we have to make sure to process the raw materials in the best manner possible. So it's all about the best possible, efficient animal nutrition that also takes animal welfare into account. In addition, we need to reduce excreta and emissions to in turn reduce the impact of animal production on the environment as much as possible. There is still much room for innovation here.





We also have to ask ourselves what sustainability really means. In terms of resources, science states that extensive animal production is often not particularly sustainable because feeding is not optimal and excreta are not sufficiently reduced. This is where there is a discrepancy between science and public perception. Society has an idealised notion of a farmer's daily work. Although farmers come under frequent fire, they have gained a lot of sympathy in recent years.

There is no farmer that does not care about animal welfare. We simply have to get this straight and communicate it more effectively to consumers in the future. After all, the consumer, who buys and consumes agricultural products, has a say in the decision.

### **If we want to sustainably increase animal welfare in food production, where do we start from?**

One of the greatest challenges of modern animal production is the sustainable and efficient improvement of animal welfare. Major factors that affect animal welfare are barn climate and animal behaviour, health and hygiene.

The 'Five Freedoms' defined by the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council have been recognised as an important basis for animal welfare: first and foremost, freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort, including factors such as space and light; and freedom from pain, injury and disease, freedom from fear and distress, and freedom to express normal behaviour complete the list.

Although these freedoms may seem obvious at first, they were not always a universal given in the past. For example, we are still conducting extensive research into what should be considered normal animal behaviour. There is still room for improvement in all five areas.

The mentioned factors are also closely linked to feeding. The obvious ones such as hunger and thirst, as well as abnormal behaviour can be improved by needs-based feeding. Feed additives in particular can affect important animal welfare indicators: the right feed mixture can prevent inflammation, reduce stress, promote gastrointestinal



health, increase well-being and vitality, and optimise resources. Feeding is therefore a central prerequisite for animal-friendly production.

### **How can feeding definitively improve animal welfare and health?**

First, there is the traditional approach of optimising the feed supply, because a well-nourished animal is healthier and more stable. Beyond that, there are plenty of other options. I like to compare this to the human sphere. What do people do when they are stressed or experience stomach discomfort? They may drink a chamomile tea. Such tried-and-tested natural active ingredients could also help our animals. In the case of humans, we have also recently discovered that a distressed digestive system affects the whole person and increases a person's susceptibility to depression, due to what we call the gut-brain axis. This confirms how important nutrition is for well-being and health.

Animals too often demonstrate changed eating behaviour when they are unwell. Stress, which can be caused by high temperatures or pregnancy, among other things, often leads to stomach and digestive problems, and negatively affects the gut microflora. We can promote both digestion and the well-being of animals by adding herbal active ingredients to their feed, thus ensuring a healthy stomach. In addition to plant additives—phytogens—it is now standard practice to use probiotics and prebiotics in animal feed, for example.

Probiotics are live microorganisms such as lactic acid bacteria or yeasts that have a positive effect on digestion. They foster a good gut microflora and protect against dangerous germs.

Prebiotics are indigestible food components, that is, dietary fibres such as oligosaccharides, found in cereals, fruits and vegetables. They provide the 'food' that the 'good bacteria' in the digestive system need to live, and induce the formation of these good bacteria.

The current trend is to value the animal as an individual, rather than part of a group. Large corporations are already investing in digital animal production. This means, for





example, that sick animals can be identified at an early stage, cared for individually and fed specifically to improve their well-being.

**Animal welfare and sustainability are major issues for farmers and society at large. What needs to change in Germany to make progress here? And what kind of support does domestic agriculture need?**

First of all, society has to learn that good quality comes at a price. When it comes to nutrition, we need to distance ourselves from the mentality that cheap is chic, because ultimately it is the consumer in the supermarket who decides what the farmer produces.

In Germany, food is not valued as highly as in Italy or France, for example, where consumers have always been willing to pay that much more money for produce from a certain type of animal production. But I believe that we have already started learning. Farmers must have the opportunity to earn money. Livestock farmers would happily do more for animal welfare if it is not at their own expense, since there's not much left at the end of the day.

If we decide that food should remain inexpensive, then we need to consider what farmers are being paid for: If not for the food, is it perhaps for environmental land management? And we need to decide whether we want to produce food here locally or would rather import it. What is the use of setting high standards for environmental protection and animal production here and then importing cheap products from countries with lower standards and rampant pollution? This is about responsibility. And the coronavirus pandemic has just shown us that world markets too can stagnate.

Recently I read an article with the title 'EU becomes less significant', which uses the greening of agriculture to justify its view. This may be true for raw materials, but I see it differently with regard to our sector. For us, greening means taking on the role of a global pioneer. Yes, less meat will be consumed. We as a company will adapt and continue doing what we do best: seeking solutions and being pioneers of the changes that are coming.





## **Talking of your company, it is considered a pioneer in the feed sector. Why is that?**

We were one of the first companies to develop products specifically to improve animal welfare. We focused on reducing antibiotic growth promoters and medication use, and promoting animal well-being. And this at a time when society had no idea that animal production without the use of antibiotics is at all possible. We have spoken with conviction and passion when advocating for additives that promote sustainable animal production and make economic sense. In fact, we were already adding probiotics to animal feed when this was still becoming a trend in human nutrition. In our case, it has always been about bringing new, good ideas to fruition in the form of solutions that the sector actually needs but are also affordable to farmers. Regrettably, in the case of animal welfare, the first thing that springs to mind is still the method of animal production. Ultimately, however, it is all about the interplay between production and feeding. We have campaigned incessantly to raise awareness of this among our customers in the last few years. The issue of animal feeding needs to get more public attention. Because it all starts with feeding.

Read the interview in German [here](#).

