

# No Billies No Milk

*That is exactly where the  
thinking must begin.*



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*Bruintjes Veehandel*

# No Billies, No Milk

A simple truth: no kids, no milk. This also means no milk without male kids. That is exactly where the thinking must begin.

Over the past twenty years, the Dutch dairy goat sector has experienced impressive growth. The popularity of goat dairy products has increased significantly, enabling the sector to firmly establish itself within agricultural food production. Yet this growth also has a darker side. While female kids are indispensable for milk production, the sector has failed to structurally consider the destination of male animals. The marketing and appreciation of male kids may therefore well be the Achilles' heel of the sector.

## 1. The Dutch Dairy Goat Sector

The Dutch dairy goat sector is relatively young. The first professional dairy goat farms emerged in the late 1980s. Many businesses were built up by the first generation of entrepreneurs themselves, often through hard work and with a forward-looking vision. Since the beginning of this century, the sector has experienced strong growth, driven by increasing demand for goat milk. According to Statistics Netherlands (CBS), the number of dairy goats in the Netherlands fell by 3 percent in 2024 to almost 475,000 animals compared to the previous year. However, compared with seven years earlier, the goat herd has still grown by 26 percent, (CBS, 2024). In 2025, a further decrease of around 5 percent in the number of milk-producing animals is expected. Current focus is increasingly on innovation and optimization within the farms, (aaff, 2025). In terms of marketing, the majority of Dutch goat milk is processed into cheese, positioning the Netherlands as the third-largest producer in Europe, after France and Spain, (ReportLinker, 2023).

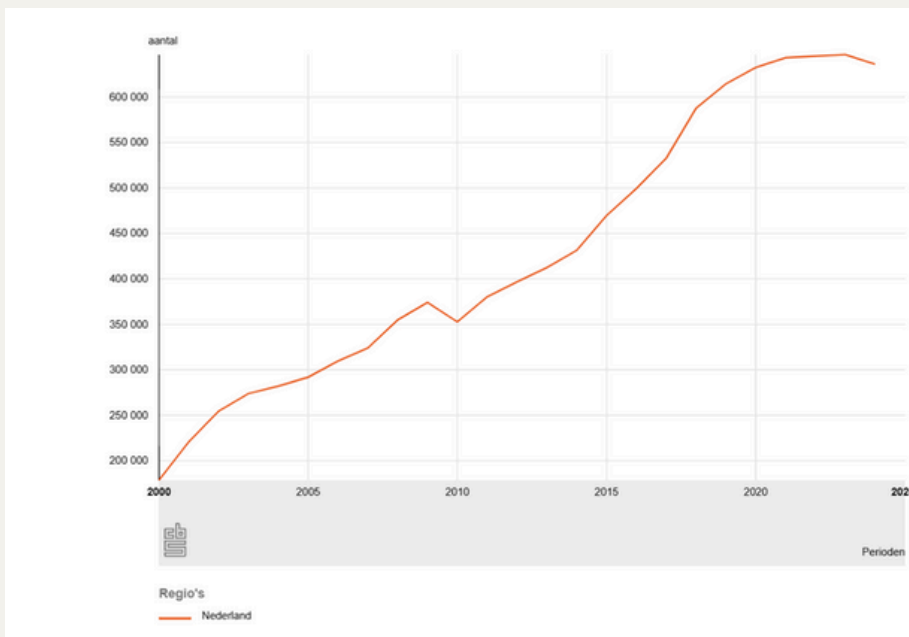


Figure 1: Total number of goats in the Netherlands from 2000 to 2025. (CBS, 2025)

Domestic consumption of goat dairy shows a mixed picture. While overall consumption of dairy and cheese has declined, goat dairy initially remained an exception to this trend. However, since 2018, a decrease has also become noticeable in this segment. Products such as milk and cheese still find their way to Dutch consumers, but a significant portion of production is destined for export. In particular, high-quality milk powders used in infant formula are mainly exported to Asia. Due to declining birth rates in these countries, sales have stagnated and new markets are being sought. (Agrimatie, n.d.)

To produce milk, a goat must give birth. Under natural circumstances, a kid would stay with its mother and continue suckling until weaning, usually between three and five months of age (Vermoesen, 2019). On average farms, however, kids are separated from the mother within the first hours after birth. In nearly all cases, this applies to both female and male kids.

To produce milk as efficiently as possible, dairy goat farmers aim for extended lactation. This means the goat continues to produce milk during the same lactation for longer than a year without a new pregnancy and birth. This practice is becoming increasingly common within the sector due to selecting the right goats in breeding, optimizing feed rations, improving healthcare, and better management practices.

## 2. The Journey Of The Male Kid

Each year, approximately 280,000 kids are born in the Netherlands. Fifty percent of these are female, fifty percent are male. The female animals are used to maintain the herd. Additionally, female animals are necessary for expanding the herd. A small percentage of the male kids are used for breeding, but the majority are sold through alternative channels. (Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland, 2024)

Selective breeding has resulted in modern dairy goats becoming highly specialized: more milk from less feed and higher efficiency. This focus on milk production has been pursued entirely at the expense of meat production traits. It is not that such meat traits were ever actively pursued in the Netherlands, but this focus on milk leads to slower daily growth, lower slaughter yields, and less desirable carcass shapes, making them less suitable for profitable meat production. Despite this reduced suitability, most of the surplus male kids end up in Southern Europe. Traditionally, a market has developed there, particularly in Spain and Portugal. The animals are fattened for about four weeks and slaughtered in the Netherlands, then consumed as young goat meat. This export flow, however, did not arise from better prices abroad but from a lack of demand in the Dutch market. Dutch consumers embraced goat milk and cheese but largely ignored the meat. While goat meat is culturally embedded in Southern Europe, in the Netherlands there is little willingness to integrate this meat into everyday diets. The result is a supply chain that exists but economically does not generate enough revenue to cover costs, let alone profitable for dairy goat farmers.

Moreover, the position of male kids on farms often remains secondary. In practice, female kids destined for milk production receive primary attention, while male kids receive relatively less priority until they leave the farm. Following critical voices from organizations such as Eyes on Animals in 2016, the welfare of male kids has become a topic of intensive discussion and regulation. Previously, male kids were sent to slaughter at a very young age or even destroyed. Since 2019, offering animals for destruction at slaughterhouses has been prohibited. The rule: "All animals delivered to the slaughterhouse must be offered for human consumption" became the new standard.

The sector decided to maintain control and introduced an action plan aimed at better understanding mortality rates on dairy goat farms. Pressure from government, consumers, and public opinion prompted the Dutch Dairy Goat Organization (NGZO) to take further steps. From 2025, all male kids must be at least 14 days old before leaving the farm. This measure aims to encourage a longer fattening period of 21 days. The tightened regulations, such as mandatory registration within seven days of birth and the prohibition of slaughter of animals younger than 14 days, have brought more transparency and responsibility to the sector. However, in practice, there is still a gap between what is expected on paper and what happens in reality.

The fundamental tension persists. These are young animals, often less than a month old, with high "cuteness" appeal. Images and information about their early death lead to great societal sensitivity, causing the sector to tend to avoid the discussion rather than confront it openly. Between ideals and reality hangs a thin line of very limited margins and uncertainty during a period in which there is little room or time to address it.

Several initiatives have been launched in recent years to create regional markets for male goat meat, led by dairy goat farmers or surrounding parties. The aim was not only to create a stable domestic market but also to develop a fair market in a chain where margins are minimal. Examples include De Bokkenbunker (Bokken Bunker, n.d.), Vooruit met de Geitenbok (Horizon, n.d.-b), Ontdek de Geit (Platform Melkgeitenhouderij, 2018), and Koopeengeit (Grutto, n.d.). These projects focused on raising awareness of male goat meat in the Netherlands, promoting a positive image, and encouraging consumers to try it. The project groups emphasized cooperation within the chain, awareness campaigns, and highlighting the taste and quality of male goat meat.

In addition, organic dairy goat farmers united in the cooperative Bio Goat Meat, founded in January 2018 by thirty entrepreneurs. The cooperative set three goals:

- To provide a good life for the male kids;
- To raise awareness of goat meat among Dutch consumers;
- To sell organic male kid meat in the Netherlands. (Bio Goat Meat, n.d.)

Several of these initiatives have since ended: De Bokkenbunker and Bio Goat Meat were dissolved on December 31, 2024; Vooruit met de Geitenbok was a subsidized project that was not continued after completion; and Koopeengeit reports on its website that goat meat sales were discontinued some time ago and replaced by lamb. Currently, there are only a few points of sale in the Netherlands where goat meat is available, mainly at Islamic butchers and in bulk products.

Although various small initiatives have emerged over the years, there is still no sector-wide willingness to sustainably improve the marketing and appreciation of male kids. This stands in stark contrast to the professionalism and innovative capacity that the dairy goat sector has demonstrated elsewhere. Dutch dairy goat farmers have proven that they are capable of achieving high-level milk production with knowledge, skill, and dedication. Yet precisely this international exemplary role brings increasing societal and political attention. Growth and optimization inevitably bring critical questions and constraints. The problem is complex and multi-layered.

### 3. The Nuffield Study

Against this backdrop, my central research question is:

**Why do efforts to manage the surplus of male kids struggle to achieve effective results, and what lessons can be learned from different countries to develop a socially acceptable, economically feasible, and animal-friendly approach?**

This question forms the core of my Nuffield research, in which I aim to connect practical experience, innovation, and knowledge sharing within the agricultural sector. The question is well suited to a Nuffield study because it encourages international comparison, reflection on one's own business practices, and the development of new insights that are relevant to the sector as a whole.

In the current situation, it is primarily the chain and the governance within it that determine the chances of success. I experience this daily: as part of the chain, as a livestock trader and transporter, I am acutely aware of the importance of doing things as well as possible within the current possibilities, for the dairy goat farmers, the animals, and the buyers. Our company specializes in the purchase and sale of slaughter goats and fattened male kids from Dutch dairy goat farms. As a result, we are directly involved in the recurring discussions around fattening and marketing male kids.

Regularly, we meet with dairy goat farmers and other chain parties to discuss the issues: what can we do differently, what do we expect from each other, and where do we want to go? Yet a real breakthrough is still absent. For us, as a livestock trading company, the priority is to do the best possible job for the animals, the farmers, and the buyers. Ultimately, every link in the chain is needed to prevent it from breaking. The steps taken in recent years, such as increasing the supply of fattened male kids and implementing a more reliable registration system, have certainly led to progress. At the same time, we still see issues arise that could rightly be called "bad apples." My own business familiarity or blindness sometimes plays a role: when you work in the same environment for a long time, you do not always see clearly where the real pain points lie.

Receiving the Nuffield Scholarship gave me the opportunity to revisit this topic. The sector and this issue have fascinated me since I was young. In primary school, I gave a presentation about it; in secondary school, I wrote an essay on it; and during my studies, it was central to my thesis.

In the meantime, time has not stood still, and significant steps have been taken within the sector. I am now an active link in this chain and encounter this “sensitive” topic on a weekly basis. When you are on the ground every day, you hear and see a lot: practice often does not align one-to-one with theory. Words like, “But Heleen Bruintjes won’t change anything about that” make me even more motivated to make a difference. I also notice this in my social environment. At birthdays or in conversations with strangers, but also friends, I am often confronted with reactions that make me think. How normal a situation may feel to me, often looks very different to others. This sometimes confronts me with the question of whether the way we work is truly correct. This does not mean I doubt what we do or how we do it. I dare say that we do it well within the current frameworks, for both animal and human. The new standards introduced by NGZO represent an important step forward. Yet I sometimes ask myself: is it good enough?

***“The sector sometimes forgets a simple truth: no kids, no milk. And that also means no milk without male kids. That is exactly where the thinking must begin.”***

## 4. Lessons From My Travels

### 4.1 Australia

All became clear to me during a visit to a dairy farm in South Australia. They held up a mirror to my question. There, I observed that heifer calves received colostrum immediately after birth, while the bull calves were left behind and only fed later. In the Netherlands, we have well-organized calf integration systems, but in countries like Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, such systems are often lacking. It is a known but rarely openly discussed issue in milk production: male animals have no clear destination. Just like with our male kids, discussion is rare, and if it occurs, it is often in softened terms. My business familiarity, where I had normalized the early removal of male kids, led me to believe that we were currently doing the best for the animals. Replacing the male kid with a bull calf raised the question: *are we truly doing the best for the animal?*

In conversations with the dairy farmer, it quickly became apparent that the issue is not only technical or economic but also deeply rooted in societal values and animal welfare. Calves are simply given less priority, which unconsciously leads to less attention to the animals. At the same time, solutions such as sexed semen or dual-purpose breeds offer perspective, but they are not miracle solutions due to practical and market-technical limitations. This is what is often called a wicked problem: a complex issue with no simple solution, where different interests clash. The surplus calf problem goes beyond technical or economic solutions and directly touches societal values and animal welfare. Sustainable change is only possible when all stakeholders: farmers, citizens, researchers, and policymakers, jointly seek solutions that are economically, socially, and ethically defensible. Experiences from Australia and similar countries show that this is not a national issue but a global one. Ignoring male animals leads to societal sensitivity everywhere, making transparency and honesty indispensable for maintaining public trust.

Both in Australia and the Netherlands, production systems are strongly efficiency-driven and export-oriented. In Australia, about 70 percent of beef is exported, and calving is seasonal, creating a high workload and logistical pressure in short periods. A similar situation exists in the Netherlands in the dairy goat sector, where 75 percent of milk production is exported and the kidding period is concentrated in spring.

These examples illustrate that agricultural systems worldwide face similar pressures: emphasis on efficiency increases the likelihood that surplus calves and male kids receive lower priority. This underscores that the issue of societal acceptance and animal welfare is an international, sector-wide problem, where transparency and shared responsibility are essential.

A concrete example is a dairy goat farmer in Victoria, Australia, with 12,000 dairy goats. This farmer may be the largest dairy goat producer in Australia and processes all milk into cheese and yogurt. Despite their scale and professionalism, they struggle with thousands of male kids each year without a clear destination. Since January 2025, they have therefore taken matters into their own hands and established their own slaughterhouse to handle all their animals. Societal pressure has already brought the company negative media attention several times. Activists have placed cameras in the barns, sharing footage of the situation. This made the entrepreneur realize that denial was not an option. The idea for the slaughter facility thus arose from fear and the desire to improve the situation under pressure. Setting up this facility has not yet provided a definitive solution. But even for them, despite their scale and absence of direct competition, finding a stable and reliable market remains difficult. The costs are seen by the company as marketing expenses, intended to protect the product's image. At the same time, they demonstrate to society that they are committed to doing better and are willing to act differently. The willingness to act differently is present. The willingness to do better for the animal, for the consumer, and for themselves is evident.

Ignoring or denying problems does not work. Societal pressure and media attention can push a company into action. By taking initiative themselves, a company can regain the narrative and control.

During my visit to an Australian sheep farmer, I learned about the industry behind the Merino sheep. In Merino farming, it is common practice to remove a piece of skin from young lambs to prevent problems with flies and maggots later on. However, the farmer raised a fundamental question: why not think ten years ahead and breed genetically for animals that naturally do not have this problem? By planning ahead and seeking structural solutions, this procedure and the public debate that comes with it, can be completely avoided.

Progress in livestock farming requires proactive thinking and a long-term vision. By investing now in genetic selection or other structural improvements, farmers can prevent future animal welfare issues, avoid public criticism, and at the same time reduce costs. It shows that short-term fixes often create future problems, whereas strategic choices that integrate animal welfare and ethics from the outset protect both the animal and the farmer.

## 4.2 England

The dairy goat sector in England is relatively small and manageable. How many animals exist is unclear. One source mentions 100,000 dairy goats, another about 50,000. This discrepancy immediately highlights how young and unstructured the sector is. Precisely at this stage, one would expect dairy goat farmers to join forces. Yet in practice, this does not happen automatically. As a dairy farmer in southwest England explained, daily operations take precedence, leaving little focus for such issues. The topic of male kids hardly comes up. Farmers acknowledge that the current situation is not ideal and that this is the time to address it. Money is currently invested in the possibilities of sexed semen, but due to the sector's size, the funds available are minimal. What stands out in the conversation is that this is a matter of long-term persistence.

In practice, male kids received little attention for years. A trader would pick up the kids at a young age to fatten them further. How this exactly happened and what the trader's business model was, the farmer did not dare to explain. That ignorance and distance is precisely what he conveyed.

Previously, it was Lizzy who collected the male kids from this farmer: at least 40 animals at a time, for about £5 per animal. They were then sent to Just Kidding. I wanted to see her approach firsthand because she attempted something no one else had seriously tried: raising male kids for meat production in an optimal and socially acceptable way. I say attempted because Just Kidding has been out of business for two years.

Lizzy started her initiative in 2013 with the desire to contribute to the sector. The male kids stayed on the farm until weaning. Once they weighed at least 16 kilograms, they were allowed outside. In the following months, they could continue growing. At eight months, they were sold and slaughtered. At a price of about £210 per animal, a profitable business model was created. The demand existed, the desire for this path for male kids was present, and a premium product was developed, loved especially by the white English consumer. Their motivation was not only a business model but also a desire to contribute to a better and responsible solution for male kids.

Yet idealism alone was not enough. The effort, care and time required outweighed the revenue. A higher price was commercially unattainable, but the fact remains that they tried for ten years and not in vain.

Not far from Avebury, I met a part-time dairy goat farmer with a different business model. She kept two hundred Boer goats, a breed specifically for meat, not from the dairy sector. The animals grazed on old grassland-land that could not be mechanically cultivated but remained valuable for biodiversity and soil restoration through grazing. The government provides an annual subsidy for this management. Since 2017, the herd grew to two hundred animals, as a complement to a mixed farm with beef cattle, arable farming, storage rental, and even a swimming pool. Yet the same undertone was present: if something must go, it's the goats. The work does not always balance with the income. Goat meat generates money, but income from old goats is needed to fill the gap. Dairy goat farming can add value through nature and landscape, but without recognition or structural financial support, it remains a vulnerable branch.

These observations taught me that the English dairy goat sector is still searching for a sustainable way to manage male kids. Initiatives like Lizzy's show that the willingness is there, but also that there are hard limits when the market does not always cooperate. At the same time, the example near Avebury shows that goats can play a role in broader business models, especially when linked to nature management and subsidies. The common thread is that idealistic projects alone do not survive. They require a solid business model or structural appreciation to make a lasting difference.

### 4.3 France

During my visit to France, it became clear that concerns about the marketing of male kids are very similar to those in the Netherlands. With a professional dairy goat sector and a large scale in numbers, France has a slightly stronger starting position: transport and processing costs are lower, making the selling price more favorable. Yet the French sector also has clear vulnerabilities. The number of slaughterhouses is decreasing, which increases transport distances, and new European transport legislation may further pressure the chain.

Notably, the number of male kids slaughtered in the past season was five percent lower than the previous year. Market developments on the sales side are considered the main cause. This immediately raises the question: were fewer kids born, or did they "remain in the chain" elsewhere?

What stands out is the involvement of surrounding sectors in keeping the male kid chain intact. The national goat farmers' association actively works to influence new transport regulations. The meat sector supports dialogue between farmers and slaughterhouses, provides communication tools, and develops plans to encourage the consumption of goat meat during holidays. Programs are also underway to make on-farm fattening of male kids more attractive, particularly as many traditional fattening operations will disappear due to aging owners. This broad involvement contrasts with the Dutch situation, where responsibility largely remains with individual dairy goat farmers.

The French experience shows that value can be added through chain collaboration and transparency. Projects with joint cost calculations demonstrate that fattening male kids can be profitable. When farmers, fatteners, slaughterhouses, and buyers make clear agreements, stability in the market and fairer prices arise. This builds trust among farmers and lowers the barrier to participate in new initiatives.

At the same time, investment is made in demand-side development: through promotional campaigns and consumer communication, efforts are made to enhance the image of goat meat and open new markets. Holiday periods create particular opportunities to stimulate consumption.

The main lesson from France is that collaboration, chain agreements, and joint communication are crucial for future-proofing the sector. While the Netherlands relies on individual dairy goat farmers, France demonstrates that collective initiatives reduce dependence on volatile market signals and unlock new value. By investing now in transparency and demand development, the sector can better withstand price fluctuations and create perspective for farmers.

## 4.4 Ireland

In Ireland, the male kid issue is hardly visible. Where it is a structural theme in the Netherlands and France, it appears minimal in Ireland. However, this absence is not a solution but rather a result of the sector's scale and structure. The Irish dairy goat sector is relatively small and cannot be compared in size and intensity with the Netherlands. As a result, bottlenecks are less visible: societal pressure is limited, and the chain is less in the spotlight. Nevertheless, Ireland pays attention to calf fattening. They recognize by-products of a dairy sector. During visits to various farms, it became clear that goat meat has almost no market value. Not because the product is unsuitable, but because there are no marketing channels. The prices received by dairy goat farmers are lower than in the Netherlands, despite the small supply potentially serving a niche market. Consequently, male kids are often quickly removed from the farm without further development of marketing options.

A main cause lies in milk sales. Ireland has only one processing facility for goat milk, and contract delivery offers no guarantee of acceptance. This unstable marketing structure prevents farmers from committing to the broader chain issue of male kids. Where other countries involve processors in chain development, this is completely absent in Ireland. Without stable partners and future perspective, entrepreneurs lack both the incentive and certainty to invest in innovation.

The fact that the male kid issue is barely addressed does not mean it does not exist. The sector temporarily escapes criticism but cannot avoid the reality that international examples will eventually be guiding. Once the sector grows or societal attention increases, Ireland will also have to make choices to give male kids a place in a full-fledged chain.

## 4.5 Morocco

In Morocco, my story was hardly understood. How could young animals be slaughtered in our country without a destination? Why are these animals mostly seen as a burden rather than a by-product, almost as waste? In countries like Morocco, people are eager to consume this meat. Not everywhere, but in almost all parts of Africa, the choice of specific meat is less important than food availability in general. This was emphasized during the World Food Forum in Rome: still, 30 percent of the global population suffers from malnutrition, while 30 percent of all food is wasted. Some of the male kids are part of this bitter contrast. Food that is undervalued here can be life-saving elsewhere.

I remember a Wednesday morning in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. We climbed a steep mountain slope. At the top, we found ourselves in the middle of a herd of goats, herded by a shepherd. His income? Selling a few goats and kids per year.

Here, culture plays a decisive role. Goats are inseparably linked to small-scale, often extensive agriculture and pastoral systems. They provide milk, meat, and hides. Moreover, goats are perfectly adapted to dry, rugged terrain where other forms of livestock are barely feasible. They are essential to daily life and food security. Male and female goat meat is widely consumed and appreciated, not only in everyday meals but also during festive occasions. Goats have a fixed place in local cuisine, traditions, and community life.

## 5. Conclusion

The surplus of male kids proves difficult to manage because the core of the problem is not technical but systemic and societal. As long as male kids in the Netherlands and similar countries do not represent clear economic value, efforts remain fragmented, vulnerable, and dependent on short-term projects. At the same time, examples from other countries show that lessons can indeed be learned: transparency and societal dialogue (Australia), structural cooperation within the chain (France), the importance of a solid business model alongside idealism (England), cultural appreciation as a determinant for consumption (Morocco), and Ireland: just because it is hardly mentioned does not mean it does not exist.

The common thread through all these experiences is that the sector cannot afford to keep optimizing within existing frameworks. Continuously pushing the problem to the margins of the system inevitably leads to societal friction, reputational damage, and economic vulnerability.

## 6. Recommendations

The central lesson is that true sustainability requires foresight and shared responsibility. Not waiting until societal pressure forces the sector into action, but deciding now:

- Where is the threshold of “good enough”? Which minimum practices are indispensable to work with a clear conscience in this chain?
- How can past failures be learned from? Which blind spots and moral misunderstandings have previously held the sector back?

Only when these questions are answered across the entire chain, can room be created for a structural solution. A solution in which every animal has a meaningful place and moral sustainability goes hand in hand with economic future-proofing.

Male kids force us to look beyond production and efficiency. They confront us with the question of whether we are willing to take responsibility for the whole, and that forward-thinking is not only morally right but ultimately also economically the smartest path.

- National “Male Kid Value Chain Pact”: It is recommended to establish a pact bringing together dairy farmers, processors, retailers, and civil society organisations to jointly define minimum welfare standards, ensure transparent reporting on male kid flows, and develop a fair cost-sharing model. This pact should be supported by the government and linked to existing quality schemes to secure broad recognition and compliance across the sector.
- International knowledge network: It is recommended to establish an international knowledge network on animal by-products within the existing Nuffield network, aimed at sharing knowledge, data, and innovative practices between countries. This network, supported by European and international funding, could help position the Netherlands as a frontrunner in the ethical valorisation of male offspring and other animal by-products within the dairy sector.

These recommendations for the goat sector aim to improve animal welfare, strengthen the economic position, and stimulate innovation and knowledge sharing within the industry. There is one thing you need to make this possible, and that is government support. It is therefore all the more important to demonstrate what you are doing and to ensure that you do what you say.

## 6.1 What I Will Do

As a link in the male kid chain, I share this responsibility. I will answer the two questions described in my recommendations responsibly and determine how to work with a clear conscience: where is my threshold of “good enough” and which minimum practices are indispensable?

By reflecting on this, I aim to lay a foundation for my chain partners. A foundation of unity and clear standards, allowing us to move forward, be future-proof, and not have to defend why we do something. Instead, we can clearly explain why it is done because this is why we do it. It is not about comparing ourselves with others. They are at most mirrors that help us see our own path. The most important question is: how do we view ourselves? Do I see the future when I look in that mirror? The answer must go beyond economics. Economy is temporary; morality is enduring. Those who find this balance build a strong chain. Today and tomorrow.

Let’s look in that mirror together and make choices that strengthen our chain. That is why I want to make a short documentary: as a mirror for myself, to demonstrate what we are doing and to ensure that we do what we say. Not to convince others, but to honestly look at what we do, why we do it, and whether it still aligns with what we value.



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