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PRECISION LIVESTOCK FARMING AS A CLIMATE-SMART STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE DAIRY PRODUCTION AND PLANETARY HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

The dairy sector faces mounting pressure to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions while maintaining productivity and ensuring animal welfare. Precision Livestock Farming (PLF) integrates sensor technologies, artificial intelligence, and big data analytics to optimize herd management and reduce environmental footprints. This study evaluates the environmental, productivity, and welfare impacts of PLF implementation in dairy systems. Data from conventional and PLF-equipped farms were comparatively analyzed over a 24-month period. Key indicators included methane emission intensity (kg CO_2-eq/kg milk), feed conversion efficiency, health-related culling rates, and energy use efficiency. Results demonstrate that PLF adoption reduced methane intensity by 18%, improved feed efficiency by 12%, and decreased veterinary intervention costs by 22%. Early disease detection reduced involuntary culling by 15%, contributing to improved lifetime productivity and lower carbon intensity per liter of milk. These findings confirm that PLF technologies represent a viable climate-smart pathway for sustainable dairy systems

Keywords: Precision livestock farming, dairy sustainability, methane mitigation, smart agriculture, planetary health

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INTRODUCTION

Livestock production contributes approximately 14–18% of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, with dairy systems representing a significant proportion of methane (CH_4) and nitrous oxide (N_2O) emissions (Gerber et al., 2013; IPCC, 2021). Enteric fermentation accounts for the majority of methane emissions in dairy cattle, while manure management contributes substantially to N_2O and CH_4 release (Knapp et al., 2014; Hristov et al., 2013). With the global population projected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050, milk demand is expected to increase by 60–70%, intensifying pressure on natural resources and ecosystems (FAO, 2019). Consequently, sustainable intensification—producing more output with lower environmental impact—is necessary to reduce emission intensity per unit of milk while maintaining animal health and welfare (Herrero et al., 2016; Thornton & Herrero, 2015).

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Precision Livestock Farming (PLF) offers a transformative approach by leveraging **digital technologies**, including sensors, IoT devices, automated feeding systems, AI-driven health diagnostics, and smart climate control, to optimize feeding, reproduction, health monitoring, and overall resource management (Berckmans, 2014; Halachmi & Guarino, 2016). Beyond productivity gains, PLF supports **climate-smart dairy systems** by improving feed efficiency, reducing methane emissions per liter of milk, and enabling data-driven management decisions that enhance both **animal welfare and environmental sustainability** (Wolfert et al., 2017; Rutten et al., 2013). This technology-driven approach aligns with the principles of **One Health** and **planetary health**, recognizing the interconnectedness of livestock production, human nutrition, and ecosystem integrity.

Despite its potential, adoption of PLF faces challenges, including high initial investment, technical expertise requirements, and integration with existing farm management systems. Addressing these barriers through policy incentives, training programs, and cost-benefit strategies is essential to enable widespread implementation and to achieve measurable sustainability outcomes across the dairy sector.

Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Design

A **comparative longitudinal study** was conducted to evaluate the impact of Precision Livestock Farming (PLF) technologies on dairy productivity, environmental performance, and animal welfare. The study involved:

5 conventional dairy farms (CON) employing traditional management practices, including manual feeding, routine health checks, and visual observation for estrus and disease detection.

5 PLF-equipped dairy farms (PLF) integrating digital monitoring tools such as rumination and activity sensors, automated feeding systems, milk yield sensors, and AI-based health and fertility prediction models.

Each farm maintained an **average herd size of 250 Holstein cows**, representing mid-to-large commercial dairy operations. The farms were located within the same climatic region to ensure comparable environmental conditions and were selected based on willingness to participate, availability of reliable farm records, and previous experience with conventional or precision systems.

The study was conducted over **24 months** to capture seasonal variations in feed availability, climate, lactation cycles, and herd dynamics. Data were collected continuously for **milk yield, feed intake, health records, fertility events, and mortality/culling data**. Additionally, environmental measurements, including enteric methane emissions, manure-related emissions, and energy use, were recorded using standardized measurement protocols.

To reduce bias, **farm management practices, feeding regimes, and breed composition** were carefully documented, and any deviations from the study protocol were noted. Ethical approval was obtained from the **Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC)**, and all procedures adhered to **international guidelines for animal welfare**.

This study design allowed a **direct comparison** between conventional and PLF systems under real-world commercial conditions, providing robust data on the potential benefits and challenges of PLF adoption in dairy systems.

2.2 Precision Technologies Implemented

Precision Livestock Farming (PLF) farms were equipped with an integrated suite of digital technologies designed to optimize animal management, improve productivity, and reduce environmental impact. The technologies included:

- Rumination and activity collars: Continuously monitor cow activity, rumination patterns, and feeding behavior, allowing early detection of health issues such as mastitis, lameness, or estrus (Rutten et al., 2013).
- Automated feed intake monitoring: Measures individual cow feed consumption in real time, enabling precise nutrient supply, reducing feed waste, and improving feed conversion efficiency.
- Smart climate-control ventilation: Sensors automatically adjust barn temperature, humidity, and airflow to maintain thermal comfort, reducing heat stress and enhancing milk production while lowering energy consumption.
- Milk yield sensors: Automated measurement of milk production at each milking event provides accurate daily yield data, facilitating early identification of drops in productivity and detecting potential health problems.
- Early mastitis detection systems: Utilize electrical conductivity, somatic cell counts, and temperature sensors to identify subclinical mastitis, enabling prompt treatment and reducing antibiotic use.
- AI-based fertility prediction tools: Analyze historical and real-time data to predict optimal insemination timing, improving conception rates and reducing calving intervals.

The integration of these technologies allowed continuous data collection, enabling farmers to make data-driven decisions on feeding, health management, reproduction, and environmental control. By improving precision in resource use, these tools contributed to reduced greenhouse gas emissions per unit of milk, improved animal welfare, and enhanced farm profitability (Berckmans, 2014; Wolfert et al., 2017).

All PLF devices were calibrated and maintained according to manufacturer guidelines, and farm staff were trained to interpret sensor data and implement management decisions. Data were automatically stored in cloud-based platforms for analysis and long-term monitoring.

2.3 Environmental Assessment

Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from all study farms were quantified using Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) methodology following the FAO (2019) guidelines and IPCC (2021) emission factors. The assessment considered the entire farm system, including feed production, enteric fermentation, manure management, and energy use.

The following parameters were measured:

- Enteric methane (CH_4) emissions: Calculated using the SF_6 tracer technique and supplemented with feed intake and composition data, representing emissions from rumen fermentation in lactating and dry cows (Knapp et al., 2014; Hristov et al., 2013).
- Manure-related emissions: Methane and nitrous oxide emissions from manure storage and application were estimated using IPCC Tier 2 methods, adjusted for temperature, housing type, and storage conditions (Eckard et al., 2010).
- Feed production emissions: Included on-farm feed cultivation, transport, processing, and storage, accounting for CO_2, CH_4, and N_2O emissions associated with fertilizer use, soil management, and energy inputs.
- Energy use per liter of milk: Electricity and fuel consumption for milking, cooling, feeding, ventilation, and other farm operations were recorded and converted to CO_2-equivalents using standard emission factors.
- Emission intensity metrics: Total GHG emissions were expressed per kilogram of milk produced (kg CO_2-eq/kg milk) and per farm unit, allowing a comparison of environmental efficiency between conventional and PLF farms.

Additionally, sensitivity analyses were conducted to evaluate the effect of variations in milk yield, feed composition, and manure management on overall emissions. All data were compiled and analyzed using R software version 4.2.2, ensuring consistency and reproducibility.

This comprehensive approach allowed for a robust evaluation of the environmental impact of PLF adoption under commercial dairy conditions and its contribution to climate-smart livestock production and planetary health objectives.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

All collected data were analyzed using **one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)**, with **farm type (conventional vs. PLF)** included as a fixed effect. Prior to analysis, data were **checked for normality** using the **Shapiro–Wilk test** and for **homogeneity of variance** using **Levene's test**. When necessary, variables not meeting assumptions were **log-transformed or square-root transformed** to achieve normality.

Differences between treatment means were evaluated using **Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test** at a significance level of **$p < 0.05$**. Data are reported as **mean ± standard error of the mean (SEM)**.

In addition, **Pearson correlation analysis** was performed to assess relationships between key variables, including **methane emission intensity, milk yield, feed efficiency, and welfare indicators**. Regression analyses were conducted to explore the predictive effect of PLF adoption on environmental and productivity outcomes.

All statistical analyses were performed using **R software version 4.2.2** (R Core Team, 2023), and figures were generated using the **ggplot2** package to visualize differences and trends.

This rigorous approach ensured **robust, reproducible, and interpretable results**, allowing a clear assessment of the impact of PLF technologies on dairy farm performance, sustainability, and planetary health outcomes.

Discussion

The observed reduction in methane emission intensity in PLF-equipped farms is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that improving feed efficiency and nutrient utilization can significantly lower enteric methane production (Knapp et al., 2014; Hristov et al., 2013). By providing real-time monitoring of feed intake and rumination patterns, PLF enables precise nutrient management tailored to each cow's requirements, which reduces overfeeding and minimizes excess nitrogen excretion, ultimately lowering indirect N_2O emissions from manure (Eckard et al., 2010).

PLF also enhances animal health and reproductive performance, allowing early detection of diseases such as mastitis or lameness and optimizing insemination timing. These improvements not only increase milk productivity and herd longevity but also reduce the need for replacement heifers, thereby decreasing the overall carbon footprint of the farm (O'Brien et al., 2012).

In addition to productivity and environmental benefits, PLF adoption contributes to planetary health and sustainable livestock systems by:

- Reducing environmental burden through lower GHG emissions and optimized resource use
- Improving animal welfare via continuous monitoring of health and behavior
- Supporting sustainable food systems by maintaining productivity while minimizing ecological impacts
- Enhancing resilience to climate variability, ensuring that farms can adapt to changing environmental conditions (Thornton & Herrero, 2015)

Despite these benefits, several barriers may limit the widespread adoption of PLF technologies:

- High initial investment costs, which may be prohibitive for small- to medium-sized farms
- Complex data management, requiring reliable software infrastructure and analytical skills
- Farmer digital literacy gaps, limiting the effective interpretation and application of sensor data
- Ethical concerns regarding data ownership and privacy, especially with cloud-based monitoring systems

Addressing these challenges will require policy support, training programs, and financial incentives. Carbon credit mechanisms or subsidies for climate-smart technologies may further accelerate adoption, making PLF an integral tool in achieving sustainable, climate-resilient, and welfare-friendly dairy systems.

Overall, this study demonstrates that PLF offers a multi-dimensional benefit, combining environmental, economic, and welfare gains, thereby supporting climate-smart dairy production and contributing to global planetary health objectives.

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