

# Ukraine's Dairy Sector: How Not to Lose the Last Herd

Anna Klochko

Anna Klochko is a Ukrainian journalist and photojournalist focusing on agriculture and rural communities, telling the stories of farmers and how they adapt to challenges. After spending time in Vancouver because of the war, where she joined the BC Farm Writers' Association, she returned to Ukraine and continues to document the resilience of farmers during wartime.

Myron Pundor is a dairy industry expert, partner of the IFCN Dairy Research Network, and an agro-efficiency advisor.



Ukraine's dairy industry needs stability, investment and renewed hope to achieve the potential this fertile country offers.

A few years ago, agro-efficiency expert Myron Pundor, then Head of Milk Procurement at "Bel Shostka Ukraine" — the Ukrainian subsidiary of the French dairy corporation Groupe Bel (known globally for brands like La Vache Qui Rit, Babybel, and Kiri) — visited one of the top-rated dairy farms in central Ukraine. It was part of a professional study tour for farmers, processors, and industry partners. At first glance, everything looked exemplary: modern milking equipment, ventilation systems, automated feed pushers, and polished demonstration facilities. But nearby, Pundor noticed a neglected old barn that stood in stark contrast to the showcase. Inside, he discovered over a hundred exhausted and sick cows, awaiting their trip to the meat plant.

The striking gap between appearances and reality became a turning point in his career.

"It was like Auschwitz for cows. I couldn't sleep for days after that," Pundor recalls. The experience drove him to leave the corporate world and dedicate himself to independent consulting, focused on improving dairy efficiency from within.

**The Hidden Crisis: Cull Rates and Cow Longevity**  
In Ukrainian dairy farms, average annual cull rates reach 33–35%, meaning that one-third of cows don't even reach their fourth lactation — the peak of productivity and milk fat content. By contrast, cows in traditional Indian herds can live 17–20 years. In Ukraine, it's common for cows to be culled after just one or two lactations.

The key reasons? Unbalanced diets, poor water quality, minimal disease prevention, and outdated management methods. Many farm directors focus more on their own job security than herd health. Meanwhile, absentee owners rarely visit their farms.

These challenges are not unique to Ukraine. Across the globe, including in North America, there is growing recognition that improving cow longevity and welfare leads to both economic and environmental benefits. Canadian and European dairy industries, for instance, are already investing in feed optimization, herd health monitoring technologies and cow comfort to reduce culling while improving lifetime yields and animal welfare.

**Milk as a Social Project**  
Before the full-scale war, dairy farming in Ukraine was often a secondary business. Farms were maintained as a social benefit for rural stakeholders, while grain crops brought the real profits. This led to chronic underinvestment: aging facilities, outdated equipment, and little incentive to upgrade systems to benefit staff and animals.

Financing also posed a major barrier. Banks avoided lending to dairies, viewing them as high-risk. Some processors filled the gap. For instance, under Larisa Rudakova's leadership, the Shostka dairy plant occasionally provided interest-free loans for milking parlors or heifer purchases, secured by future milk deliveries.

**The Kozatska Case: How Straw and Molasses Changed Everything**  
One of the most compelling success stories is Pundor's collaboration with Kozatska Agrofarm. The farm started with 500 cows, a 29% annual cull rate, daily yields of 10–11 tonnes, and milk fat levels around 3.2–3.4%.

The first major change was adding structural fiber — simple straw — to the cows' ration. Shredded with an American chopper and mixed with concentrate and acidic silage, it helped stabilize rumen pH, preserve microbiota,



Myron Pundor left his corporate dairy job in hopes of bringing meaningful improvement to the lives of the cows and people of Ukraine. The war has layered on multiple threats to their dairy industry.

and improve digestion. The farm also introduced molasses for energy. The results were significant: higher milk fat, lower somatic cell counts, better cow condition, and reduced culling to 18%. Herd size eventually grew to nearly 800 cows.

**Milk Fat Matters**  
Ukraine's baseline milk fat content remains stuck at 3.4%, while countries like the Netherlands achieve 4.3–4.6%. Boosting fat levels isn't just about genetics — it can be done with nutrition: more fiber, less starch, clean water, and proper ventilation (especially during summer heat).

"Milk fat is the most manageable and profitable milk component," says Pundor. "Even a 0.5% increase means millions of hryvnias across the national industry." (Equivalent to \$100M CAD annually). The value of butterfat is well-understood across developed dairy nations and is a key driver of production.

**Investing Under Fire**  
Despite the war, some Ukrainian farmers continue investing in ventilation, straw choppers, extruders for feed, biogas plants, and solar energy. One relocated farm, "Agrarian Investments" in Sumy region, rebuilt its entire operation after evacuating from the border zone. For many, these improvements are less about expansion and more about survival in today's extreme conditions.

**Looking Forward: Technology, Fat, and Longevity**  
According to calculations by Pundor, based on Ukraine's current cattle capacity, feed base, and other essential resources, the country's dairy sector has the potential to increase milk production to 8–9 million tonnes — even without taking into account the occupied territories, which make up about 20% of Ukraine's land area. But this requires:

- Scaling farms up to 1000+ cows or building modular dairies;
- Extending productive life via prevention and comfort;

Focusing on milk components, especially fat content. These goals align with broader international strategies aimed at reducing emissions per liter of milk and increasing resource-use efficiency per cow. Ukraine's path forward could position it as a regional leader in sustainable dairy, especially as global markets seek alternatives to traditional suppliers facing environmental or geopolitical constraints.

## The Moroccan Experiment: Microgreens, Macro Results

In 2024, Pundor was invited to consult for Tarmast Dairy Farm in Morocco — a country facing climate extremes, water scarcity, and soil degradation. Despite milking 400 cows, it had been operating at a loss for several years.

Following a hands-on audit, Pundor recommended:

- Culling problem/unproductive cows;
- Adding cane sugar to the ration (molasses was unavailable);
- Increasing the amount of high quality alfalfa;
- Adding sprouted grains (microgreens) for vitamin-rich fodder.

The results were dramatic. Within three months, milk yields increased by 5 liters per cow per day — double what was expected. The improvement came from better fiber digestion, metabolic function, and immunity. All with low costs and manual seeding in a vertical farm. "I still don't fully understand how just 1 kg of extra dry matter gave that result. It's a discovery," Pundor reflects.

**Ukraine's Dairy Sector at a Crossroads**  
Ukraine's milking herd is shrinking fast. If the current trend continues, the country may have fewer than 1 million dairy cows by 2026–2027. That would put the entire sector's viability at risk.

Russia's war has only worsened the crisis. Many farms have been destroyed or relocated; others operate under constant threat. Occupation, shelling-related livestock deaths, population displacement, labor shortages, and supply chain breakdowns have all taken a toll.

For the first time in decades, officially recorded milk production has slipped below 7M tonnes annually. Yet, Ukraine still has all the essentials: fertile soils, pastures, strong dairy history and skilled professionals.

Without a shift in approach and broader support from government and investors, Ukraine's dairy sector risks disappearing where potential once flourished. The challenges may seem daunting, but they are not unfamiliar to global producers.

Pundor remains hopeful. "I believe after victory, Ukraine can rebuild and return to producing at least 10M tonnes of milk. The potential is there — it just needs stability and investment."



Resilient. Despite the war, people remain committed to keeping their ag operations going, defiant in the face of steep odds for three plus years!