

Disappearing livestock

Agricultural biodiversity is under threat again. The world's livestock production has become dangerously over-reliant on just a few high-yielding breeds, causing the loss of many hardier breeds, well suited to poor countries, according to a new report by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

This ground breaking survey of the world's animal genetic resources, says 20 per cent of the more than 7,600 breeds of farm animals and poultry it has identified are at risk of extinction. Over the past six years almost one breed has been lost every month.

Carlos Seré, director general of the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), is calling for the rapid establishment of gene banks, especially in Africa, to conserve the sperm and eggs of animals at risk.

"Valuable breeds are disappearing at an alarming rate," he told an international technical conference on animal genetic resources in Interlaken, Switzerland. "In many cases we will not even know the true value of an existing breed until it is already gone. This is why we need to act now to conserve what's left by putting them in gene banks."

The FAO report, surveyed livestock in nearly 170 countries. It found that the black-and-white Holstein-Friesian dairy cow is now found in 128 countries around the world, while 90 per cent of cattle in industrialised nations come from just six tightly defined breeds. Developing countries account for nearly 70 per cent of the world's remaining unique livestock breeds but these are being rapidly replaced by higher yielding stock imported from Europe and the US.

Mr Seré says that despite the short-term benefits this strategy poses high risks because many of these breeds cannot cope with developing country conditions. ILRI points to the example of Uganda where, during a recent drought, farmers that had kept their hardy Ankole cattle were able to walk them long distances to water sources, while those who had traded the Ankole for Holstein-Friesians or other imported breeds lost their entire herds.

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