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Beef and Dairy Crosses

The extensive use of sexed semen for the last several years has resulted in many dairy farms having an abundance of heifers on inventory. It is becoming a common practice to commit a segment of the herd to produce replacement females while the majority of cows will be inseminated with beef semen in order to create crossbred animals destined for the beef industry. These calves will be more valuable than straight dairy breeds but there are some things that dairymen need to consider while implementing this strategy.

The beef industry has been running parallel genetic evaluation with the dairy industry for the past 20 years. The beef industry has been documenting and increasing the accuracy for the inheritance of beef production traits just like the dairy industry has been documenting milk production traits. The effort to increase milk production has indirectly increased the overall body size of Holsteins. The size of the Holsteins has been a problem in harvest facilities. Most of the plants were designed for the smaller stature beef breeds. The Holsteins are taller and therefore longer when hanging which on occasion means that the animals head drags on the floor. When this happens the whole carcass is likely to be condemned. The crossbred animals as a result of a Holstein crossed with beef could result in the same problem.

It is important when making genetic decisions to keep this problem in mind. The dairyman must assess the size of his/her cows and then choose beef bulls that would result in a smaller animal size in order to avoid the carcass length problems. Some of our clients have been using beef bulls and I have been disappointed in the genetic quality of the calves. When I looked at the genetic merit of the bulls that they were given, I was disappointed in the carcass quality and yearling weight of these bulls. Dairymen need to either educate themselves on the evaluation of beef production traits or use specialist that they can trust to assist with the selection of beef bulls that will produce the most desirable carcass for the industry. These calves that are being produced must fit with the current pricing grids for beef animals in order to have good sale value for the industry. It will not be beneficial for the dairy industry to just produce more calves that don't have increased value.

What are the primary characteristics that the dairyman should be looking for in beef sires? For starters, they don't need to select for low birth, weaning and yearling weights. These traits are largely desirable for first calf beef heifers, not large framed dairy cows. The best beef sires would be average for birth weight, high for weaning and yearling weights. If a dairyman plans to sell his/her calves around 400-500 pounds then weaning weight should be the focus. If the dairyman plans to sell calves at older ages, then he/she should select bulls that have high yearling weights. The next selection criterion should be for moderate growth to mediate the larger frame size. The selection of high quality beef sires will improve the marketability of the calves and will provide the initial discussions with feeders to feed these calves and get them marketed to a packer. Again, the dairyman needs to develop a relationship with a feeder.

After the dairyman has selected complimentary beef sires, then he/she must decide how to market the calves that they are producing. Holstein calves have been scrutinized over the years for their susceptibility to liver abscesses. The dairyman will need to verify to potential buyers that their calves do not have increased incidence of this disorder. This can be accomplished by validating clean livers during any postmortem examinations of young calves

regardless of the cause of death. The easiest way is to take pictures and keep them for use later with potential buyers. The next step is to establish a relationship with feeders in their areas of operation. I have talked to many dairy producers that were under the impression that they can feed their own calves and then market them to packers. This idea is likely not possible. In order to get cattle processed, there has to be available contracts for harvest of these animals and those contracts currently lie in the hands of feeders. Therefore, if a dairyman wants to feed their own cattle, they will have to obtain contracts to get them harvested and ultimately paid.

The dairyman must understand that if he/she wants to market high value beef calves, they are going to have to learn how the beef industry operates because there are different segments all for a different purpose. Marketing some crossbred calves has the potential to increase the bottom line for the dairy but must be accomplished with careful planning and implementation.