

Beef to Stay in Business Kraig Peel, Ph.D.

All recent market reports are indicating that milk prices are most likely to hold steady unless demand increases or we somehow take some cows out of the system to reduce milk supply. This is not good news to the producers that I work with. Most of our clients have been using some beef as a terminal cross within their AI programs. Can beef sales be used to help keep a dairy in business?

In order for a milk cow to return to production she must become pregnant and give birth. The breed of the calf has no consequence on her lactation. So why not produce a calf that has more value than a dairy male? Many of our clients are using beef semen but that is the only parameter that the dairyman communicates to the breeders. I have seen some beef semen that was used that definitely was not selected for carcass merit. Most have been bulls that are readily available and in adequate supply because no one else is using them. I have been surprised to find how little dairymen understand about choosing good terminal cross bulls. One dairyman stated that he had to use low birth weight bulls for Holstein cows. This is counterintuitive due to the size of most mature dairy cows.

Dairymen need to understand the process of producing beef and how to market calves that are destined for that system similar to commercial cow calf producers. In order to produce calves that are desirable to backgrounders or feedlots we must select for high carcass merit. All breeds currently have extensive EPD data for all carcass traits with a high degree of accuracy. There are also a variety of breeds that have the ability to increase the carcass quality in crossbred calves. Often the best breeds to use are the breeds that have local markets. Those local markets are determined by the feeders and harvest facilities that are accessible. It is important for the dairyman to do some research in his/her area regarding which breeds are the most desired.

The dairyman must determine when he/she plans to market these crossbred calves. The timing of marketing will determine the best course for genetic selection. If the dairyman plans to market these calves shortly after leaving the hutch, then the best selection course would be to select for high weaning weight producing bulls. This will assist in providing the best genetics for the most weight gain at weaning. If the dairyman plans to keep these calves around after weaning to eat pushdown or less desirable feedstuffs then they will want to select for high weaning weight genetics. There are multiple breeds that will achieve these goals. There is some movement by the breed associations to work toward some Holstein cross branded programs that will drive some increased pricing opportunities in the future. The Simmental association recently developed just such a program in association with the Holstein breed registry.

Should dairyman worry about birth weight? I do not believe that birth weight is a primary selection criterion unless they are breeding some heifers to beef bulls, which is also a potential strategy. Most of the farms that we work with have more heifers than they need due to the efficiency and accuracy of sexed semen. I have been recommending that a heifer gets 2 chances with sexed Holstein semen then they go to beef. This strategy should help us to be selecting heifers that are

more reproductively efficient. Over time, if we are keeping the females out of those heifers that bred the first or second time, we are indirectly selecting for reproductive efficiency. These females will likely be more likely to become pregnant to AI like their mothers. All of these changes are positive for the dairy. If we are using beef semen on heifers, then being careful with birth weight is important. We need to at least select for a no change in birth weight but definitely not an increase in birth weight. The last thing we want is to have an increased dystocia rate in first lactation females.

Crossbred beef calves have the potential to generate a new revenue stream for most dairies. The dairyman should develop some local relationships to determine the best breeds for the area. Then make smart genetic selections that will yield the most possible income for the dairy. Anytime we can generate new revenue streams, there will be a positive effect on the bottom line!