

FARMERS URGED TO BEEF UP GENETICS

By Hugh Stringleman - Farmers Weekly August 7, 2017



AgFirst consultant Bob Thomson says better beef genetics are worth the effort.

Dairy farmers have been urged to use better beef genetics to produce higher-value calves that are not required as herd replacements.

Fit-for-purpose beef genetics enabled dairy cows to get in-calf easily, have a gestation no longer than dairy genetics and produce a live calf that has value as a beef finishing animal, AgFirst Waikato farm consultant Bob Thomson said.

Better beef genetics offered a double-barrelled benefit – they were positive and safe to use in the dairy herd and increased the beef value proposition in the surplus calves.

The most suitable beef bulls came in a straw, not on the hoof, because they were usually highly selected and had been progeny tested.

These highly selected and proven beef bulls gave the farmer confidence that what was claimed in the brochures happened down on the farm.

Thomson advocated using AI with proven beef bulls on the balance of the cow herd after dairy bull AI had produced the heifer replacements needed.

“Actual progeny test results represented via semen are much safer than predicted results represented on the hoof.”

Thomson has devoted much of his life’s work as a farm consultant to improving the beef value chain for farmers and trying to forge stronger links between the dairy and meat industries.

His latest campaign was not going to make him popular with vendors of unrecorded yearling beef bulls to dairy farmers in September auctions.

In the midst of calving and the lead up to spring mating of five million-plus dairy cows, he drew attention to the wide range of options facing the farmer who was planning a mating programme.

“On one hand we have bulls available from beef bull breeding herds with none or low genetic specification and on the other hand we have purpose-bred beef bulls (and semen) with genetic specifications that make them fit-for-purpose.”

The recent Dairy-Beef Integration Project and the current Beef + Lamb Genetics progeny test on Limestone Downs both demonstrated that unselected beef bulls were risky to use.

“They generally have higher levels of calving difficulty, longer gestation length and lower post-birth calf growth rate.

“They were often not fit-for-purpose.

“On the other hand, the best of the beef bulls from each project demonstrated that if you take the time to find beef genetics that are fit-for-purpose it is worth the effort.

“At the very least beef bulls should be purchased from breeders recording on Group Breedplan with breeding values offering good value propositions to dairy farmers – that would mean short gestation length and well above breed average for calving ease.”

Thomson drew attention to the gestation length aspect, in that every day a cow was earlier in milk was \$10 of income, based on a \$6/kg milksolids payout.

A recent study of beef bulls suitable for dairy-beef production showed that the best available beef AI bulls had breeding values for gestation length of minus 12 days.

When used over average gestation length dairy cows the cows would calve six days earlier.

But some beef breeds had gestation lengths longer than the dairy cows they were mated to.

For example, Herefords have an average two days longer gestation length than Angus and Holstein Friesian.

Most of the European breeds have gestation lengths five days longer.

“So, when choosing a beef breed check out the gestation length for the breed and then the bull,” Thomson advised.

The myth that dairy-beef was inferior quality to traditionally bred beef had been disproved.

“Quality dairy-beef is at least equal to traditional beef, and that has been proven by NZ and overseas research, plus the practical and measured results from the marketplace.”

At the farm level the biggest contribution to higher-value dairy-beef was in the selection of fit-for-purpose beef genetics, he concluded.