How to Rear Valuable Calves

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It takes careful genetics to rear high value calves.

The challenge to create a better value proposition for rearing dairy-beef calves is compelling and one the dairy and beef industries are acutely aware of.

Bob Thomson, a farm consultant with AgFirst, defines a dairy-beef calf as one that is not required as a heifer replacement in the dairy herd and therefore surplus to requirements.

"The dairy-beef calf comes in many forms and possibly the best known is the high-content-Friesian bull calf which is highly valued for finishing for the manufacturing beef trade," he says.

"When talking about beef, quality dairy-beef is at least of equal quality to traditionally bred beef - comprehensive NZ and overseas research backs this up as well as the practical and measured results from the marketplace."

"The white-faced Hereford/Friesian calf is equally as well known, commanding a premium in the sale yards and usually finished for local trade or for the export beef market.

I'm concerned, however, that there are hundreds of thousands of dairy-beef calves that are of low value for beef finishing and end up as bobbies, raising the question 'what can we do to make these surplus calves more valuable?'"

Mr Thomson believes the answer lies in better beef genetics which offer double-barrel benefits - they must be positive and safe to use in the dairy herd and must also increase the beef value proposition of the surplus dairy-beef calf.

"However, before we rush headlong into the dairy-beef discussion let's pause for a minute and dispel some industry myths," he says.

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"At farm level, by far the biggest contributor to resolving the dairy-beef challenge can be found with the selection of beef genetics that are fit for purpose.

"That is, beef genetics that will enable 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.

"The conundrum is that there are huge differences in the beef genetics on offer - 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."

Mr Thomson says a beef bull is much more than just a mobile inseminator - usually better represented in a straw than on the hoof.

"Two recent industry initiatives demonstrate the value proposition for better beef genetics - the first funded by Beef + Lamb NZ which was called the Dairy-Beef Integration Project and conducted by AgResearch over five years. The second, Beef + Lamb Genetics' dairy-beef progeny test, which is currently running on Limestone Downs.

"Both projects confirm unselected beef bulls are risky to use - they 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."

And just like dairy bulls, Mr Thomson says the very best beef bulls are found 'in a straw' and not 'on the hoof' because dairy farmers are able to select the very best 'fit for purpose' beef bulls that have been progeny tested.

"That means that not only will be the results be better, they will also be more reliable. Actual progeny test results represented via semen are much safer than predicted results represented on the hoof."

Mr Thomson is urging dairy farmers to consider the very strong value proposition which exists to breed the balance of the herd (after replacements) to high breeding value proven beef genetics.

"The hard-cold numbers suggest that this is a more serious opportunity than you may have considered," he says.

"For every day earlier calving there's another 1.5 kg milk solids in the tank and that's the thick-end of $10 per cow in the bank - so in round numbers $,000 for every 100 cows."

When it comes to gestation length not all breeds are the same and not all bulls within breed are the same. 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 meaning that when used over average gestation length dairy cows the cows would calve six days earlier.

But some beef breeds have gestation lengths that are longer than the dairy cows they're mated to.

For example, Hereford have two days longer gestation length than Angus and Friesian. So, when choosing a beef breed check out the gestation length for the breed and then the bull.

- Te Awamutu Courier