

# Beef on Dairy

*Beef influence on dairy cattle could improve marketing options.*

*by Kay Ledbetter, Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension*

Dairy owners might be able to add to their bottom line if they introduce a beef bull into their breeding program for some of the cows in their herd, a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service specialist said. However, just any bull from the sale barn won't work.

While Ted McCollum was addressing dairymen and women at the High Plains Dairy Conference in Amarillo, his comments are applicable to those selling beef bulls.

"At today's costs, dairy calves generally look at a \$70 hickey because of inefficiency in the feedyard, and there are other value concerns relative to a beef calf," McCollum said. "These costs and value concerns have to work back through the system to the dairy calf value."

McCollum said a beef-on-dairy breeding program can add value to dairy calves grown for beef by improving growth, performance and overall carcass value. It also may reduce costs associated with losses from calving difficulty and stillbirths.

Some issues for dairy cattle in the beef market include lower gain, inferior feed efficiency, final weight/carcass weight that can be too light or too heavy, lower red-meat yield and dairy conformation discounts, he said.

## Weight issues

With straight-bred Jersey-type cattle, one problem is light carcasses, McCollum said. Carcasses need to weigh more than 625 pounds (lb.) to avoid discounts. Holstein cattle, on the other hand, can be too large-framed.



*Beef influence in a dairy breeding program for some cows can increase the marketability of calves, according to Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.*

"Both can be issues at the packer," he said.

Fed beef cattle will have higher carcass and red-meat yield relative to dairy-type cattle fed for the beef market, McCollum said. At similar live weights, dairy-type cattle yield lighter carcasses, and the carcasses may yield fewer pounds of retail beef cuts than a beef animal.

"Beef cattle dress out at about 64% and dairy at 61% or 62% or less," he said. "You're losing carcass weight."

## Conformation

Another issue with dairy cattle going into the beef market is their conformation — what the carcass musculature looks like.

"They are simply light-muscled, and their ribeye is a different shape," McCollum explains. "If you sell cattle on the grid, there is a discount on dairy conformation that has nothing to do with yield or quality grade."

Those issues can be addressed if a dairy owner will consider using a beef bull on a portion of their dairy cows, McCollum said.

## Traits of importance

"Because of the combination of

characteristics needed in a bull, you are not going to find the bull you need at the sale barn," he told dairymen, advising them to select bulls that complement their dairy breed. "Find bulls of known genetic potential for birth weight, growth, muscling, carcass grade and weight, or work with an AI (artificial insemination) company with programs that offer beef sires targeted for use on dairy cows."

Traits to look for are feeding performance — gain and efficiency, final weight, carcass weight, muscling, conformation and red-meat yield, McCollum said. When considering sire selection for Jersey and Jersey-influenced cows, additional traits to consider are lower birth weight and accelerated growth. Sires to use on Holstein cows will differ.

Discussing the merit of using sexed semen, McCollum said male calves always sell for more than females. The producer will need to compare the dollar difference for a steer and heifer and then make the determination on whether that difference is enough to offset the cost of using sexed semen.

"Currently on the light calf market, 400 to 500 pounds, there is a \$10- to \$20-per-hundredweight differential, so \$40 to \$100 per head," McCollum said. "So you have to determine if this justifies the added expense of sexed semen." **AJ**

*Editor's Note: Photos are provided courtesy of Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension, for which Kay Ledbetter is a communications specialist in Amarillo.*