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Beef-on-dairy: Best management practices

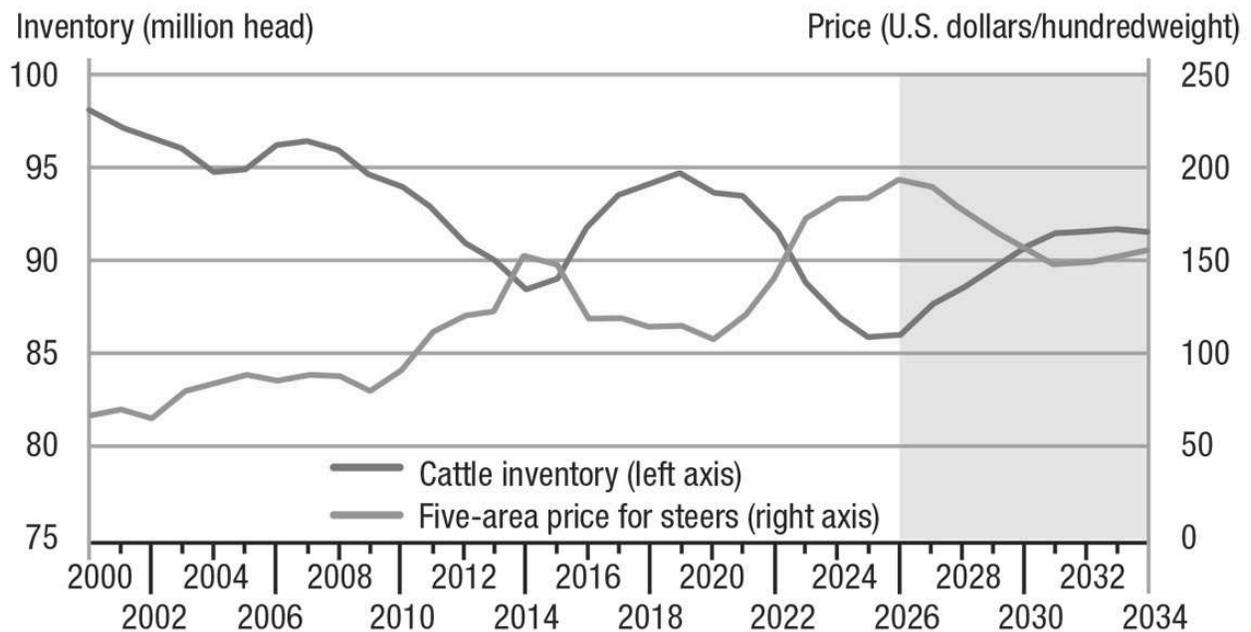
The current cattle market makes beef-on-dairy calves extremely valuable. Utilizing genetics and high-quality nutrition can give these calves an advantage at the sale barn.

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The utilization of beef semen on dairy cattle to create higher-value crossbred calves has proven to be an effective strategy for dairy producers. With native beef cattle populations at record lows, the demand for beef-on-dairy calves remains high, yielding record-high prices for these day-old calves. However, if there's one thing dairy producers know from milk markets, it's that high prices don't last forever.

As seen in **Figure 1**, the U.S. cattle inventory is projected to grow over the next seven years. As the cattle population expands, there is potential for the high prices for beef-on-dairy calves to soften. Dairy producers who focus on creating quality beef-on-dairy calves will have the edge as the market dynamics continue to shift.

FIGURE 1**U.S. cattle inventory projected to grow through 2033**

Note: The shaded area represents the projected period. The five-area steer price is a weighted average price for major production areas in Texas/Oklahoma/New Mexico, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado and Iowa/Minnesota.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the USDA, Interagency Agricultural Projections Committee

Best practices when selling wet calves

Selling beef-on-dairy crosses within the first week of being born aligns with the traditional strategy of selling purebred dairy bull calves early in life. The advantages are reduced risk and reduced inputs. Despite their early departure from the farm, there are a few practices that can be implemented to get these calves off to a great start and aid in future performance.

Using the right genetics

Sire selection is a key management practice in creating desirable cattle. There are many beef breeds that can be used on dairy females to improve the value of calves sold for beef purposes. Each breed has pros and cons, but it is more important to remember that the genetic quality of sires within a particular breed varies dramatically. Working with your genetic consultant and potential buyers to determine which sires within a breed to use will ensure that you are meeting the goals of your beef-on-dairy strategy. As this segment of the industry grows, more emphasis will be placed on determining sire lines that produce the best beef-on-dairy calves.

Identification

Identifying your crossbred calves with permanent identification numbers and associating them with the management data you collect aids in the marketability of your animals. Often, data collection and management are as valuable as the calf itself.

Data collection

Knowing how calves are managed prior to purchase is extraordinarily valuable to potential buyers. Maintaining accurate records and providing those records to buyers will help ensure you have a long-term outlet for your beef-on-dairy crosses. A list of items to track can include:

- Date of birth
- Sire breed or NAAB code
- Colostrum feeding
- Vaccinations

Colostrum management

Nothing is more important to early calf success than colostrum. Feeding an adequate volume of high-quality colostrum in the initial stages of life is the backbone to any calf's future. Operations that emphasize colostrum management have better calf success long-term. Focus on these standards:

- Feed colostrum with a minimum immunoglobulin G (IgG) concentration of 50 milligrams per milliliter.
 1. If using a colostrometer, colostrum testing in the green range meets this threshold.
 2. If using a Brix refractometer, colostrum testing 22% or greater meets this threshold.
- The first colostrum feeding is recommended to be 10% to 12% of bodyweight. Four quarts of colostrum is adequate for an average-size Holstein or beef-on-dairy cross calf.
- Feed colostrum soon after birth; within two hours is ideal. Calves gradually lose the ability to absorb the antibodies found in colostrum, so having that first feeding close to the time of birth helps maintain the effectiveness of the colostrum.
- Calf total protein measurements at 24 hours to 7 days old should be greater or equal to 5.5 grams per deciliter (g/dL). Total protein is an indirect measure of serum IgG and is a simple way to determine passive transfer success. Operations can use this to monitor their colostrum success.

Navel care

Using 7% iodine or other commercially available products to treat navels will help prevent infection. Navel disinfection should occur as soon as possible after birth, making sure that both the navel area and umbilical cord are treated.

Vaccinations

Work with your veterinarian to determine a vaccination protocol that fits your needs.

Recognize that the vaccination strategy implemented for the dam is going to have a much greater effect on the calves' immune system than any newborn vaccination strategy could.

Best practices for backgrounding or finishing

Some dairy producers are choosing to precondition or background their cattle. Others choose to raise crossbred cattle through finishing. Both can be viable strategies to add value to calves for dairies with space and feed to care for their beef-on-dairy crossbreds.

Preconditioning or backgrounding means raising an animal to between 400 and 700 pounds, then selling to a feedlot. Early life care and management strategies are still critical parts of getting these calves started well. Here are some additional practices for herds that choose to background or finish their crossbred calves:

- **Feeding pre-weaned calves:** According to Purina researchers, feeding a high plane of nutrition, meaning 1.5 to 1.8 pounds of milk replacer per day, will result in improved performance while reducing the cost per pound of gain. It is recommended to wean at 8 weeks old at minimum, as early weaning can result in reduced efficiency. Their research also indicates that feeding a starter feed with at least 20% protein is important for adequate muscle growth. Feeding this same feed until about 12 weeks old will enhance performance.
- **Castrating and dehorning:** Surgical castration should be performed prior to weaning, with pain mitigation. Not all breeds of beef sires carry the polled gene, so dehorning prior to weaning may also be required. Wounds from castration or dehorning should be fully healed prior to transport. To understand more about the best methods for surgical castration, dehorning and pain mitigation, consult with your veterinarian.
- **Genomic testing:** Just like using genomic testing for heifer selection, genomic predictions for beef-on-dairy calves opens incredible doors for data collection and management. Utilizing these genomic platforms can help target beef quality parameters, predict optimum days on feed and even determine health characteristics. This information can be an invaluable tool for operations to capitalize on opportunities.
- **Monitoring growth:** In the pre-weaning phase, calves should double their birthweight or achieve 1.5 pounds of average daily gain by 8 weeks old. Continue to track weight and calculate average daily gain until animals are sold or finished. Pen movements and ra-

tion changes are opportunities to perform these weight checks. Monitoring growth will help you work with your nutritionist to adjust feeding strategies and provide valuable data to potential buyers.

- **Vaccination and health records:** Recording vaccinations, health events and treatments is a critical management practice whether you are backgrounding or finishing cattle. Buyers of backgrounded cattle are more receptive to animals on which they have historical records. Accurate recordkeeping also plays a crucial role in adhering to withdrawal periods as part of treatment protocols. Vaccination needs for crossbred cattle will be different than your replacement heifers, so work with your veterinarian to establish the right protocols.

Breeding a portion of dairy cattle to beef will continue as a viable option for dairy producers to diversify revenue. In a dynamic market, those who focus on the right strategy and management practices to fit their business goals will continue to see increased value from their beef-on-dairy program.