

Reviewing Dairy Calf Purchases

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There has been an increased interest in calf rearing systems over the last spring. Positive research results on profitability, new farmers trying to get a start and people working more from home is likely the main driver of this interest. Now is a good time to reflect on what went right and what went wrong with this spring's purchases.

Purchasing practices can make or break the entire calf rearing system and it is a long painful wait watching bad decisions work their way through the cycle. Purchasing from multiple source herds seems to be a factor in disease breakdowns. I would advise clients to approach dairy farmers with calves to sell directly and to try source all calves from as few dairy farms as possible. This avoids mixing, stress through a mart and prolonged transport. You can also continue to source calves from 'good' herds you have identified in future years and cut out herds where calves have given issues. When you visit a farm look not only at the calves offered for sale but all calves in the yard. Do not be slow to walk away where there appears to be scour, naval or pneumonia issues even if the calves for sale appear healthy. It is better have no calf than a sick calf. Vaccination is not a get out of jail free card where underlying conditions are poor it is more to optimise already good management. Once the calf is right on day one and you have your own management in order you have a much improved chance of being profitable.

The carcass potential of the calves is another important factor. The difference between animals with good carcass traits and poor traits even within a breed has been shown to be significant. The performance issue can be due to a mismatch in priorities between buyer and seller at present. It makes perfect sense for a dairy farmer to select on calving ease and short gestation as priority traits. The issue is that there are bulls meeting this criteria that happen to have low or negative carcass weight traits. The Dairy Beef Index is one resource that tries to assist dairy farmers select bulls that meet their requirements but also have positive carcass traits for the buyer. As a buyer research on the parentage of calves will be rewarded with performance as can be seen in Table 1 accompanying this article.

Pricing is another hurdle. This has been shown to have a significant impact on end margin. Buying at the right price is difficult. Although calf numbers have increased my impression is that where calves are perceived to be good quality demand meets or exceeds supply particularly in peak buying months. Holding off and buying late in the purchasing season when demand has cooled pushes out slaughter dates and can lead to higher housing requirements down the line. A key skill that is developed more through trial and error is finding value in the marketplace. Again parentage due diligence is important as I have seen incidents in the past where Holstein Friesian bull prices were paid for what turned out to have a significant percentage Jersey ancestry.

Reviewing a system or process in detail so as to come up with better solutions in the future is the way to improve. A good resource for finished cattle on ICBF is the slaughter report which can also identify the source herd beside an animal's finishing performance. You can quickly see which herds are delivering animals with higher performance potential versus those that are not.

Questions to ask:

- Which calves had health issues and where did they come from?
- Which animals performed well at weighing, slaughter or sale and what bulls were they out of?
- What was the purchase price breakdown and how does it match with sales performance. Where was the best value got?

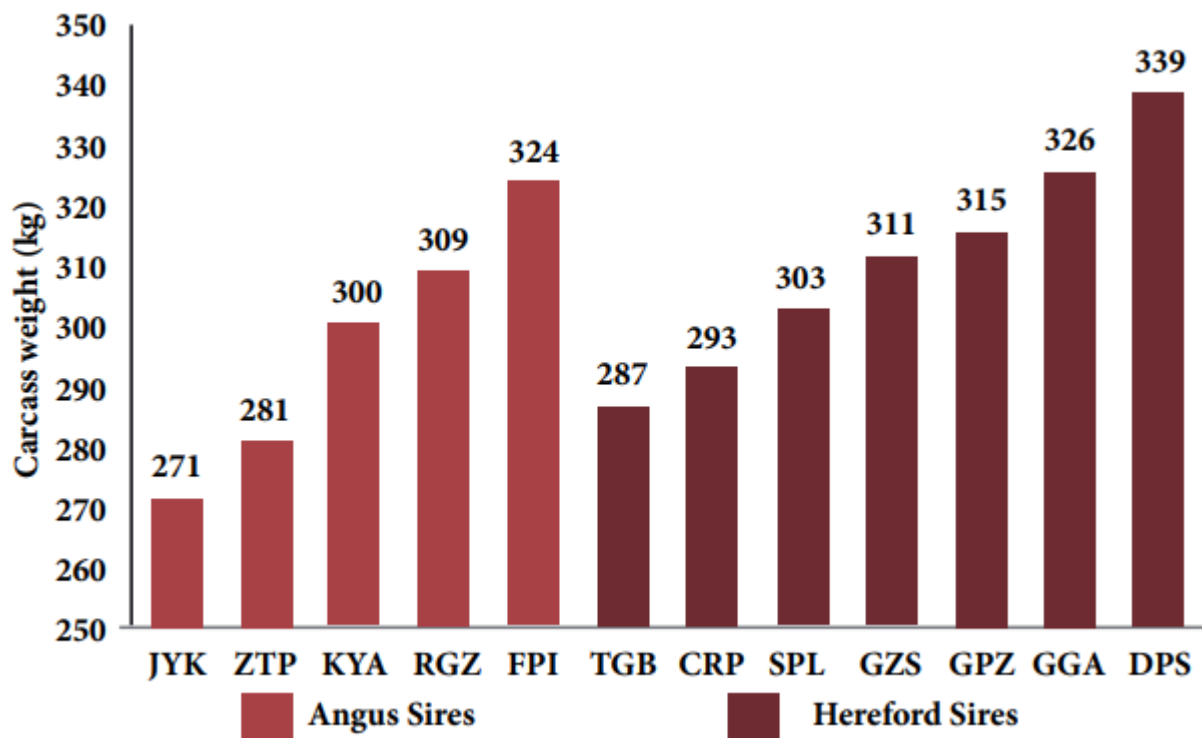


Table 1: Research trial results comparing a sample of AI sires used on dairy cows. This shows there is significant differences within a breed on eventual carcass weight. Therefore sourcing calves out of bulls capable of delivering better carcass performance should have a significant effect on your profitability potential. Sourced from Teagasc National Beef Conference 2017 Proceedings *'How Can Genetics Play a Role in Profitable Dairy Beef System?'*