

beef

First impressions can deceive calf buyers

The new Commercial Beef Value tool means buyers know what they are buying.

Aidan Murray
Teagasc Beef Specialist.

Whether we like it or not, more and more of our beef cattle are sourced from a 'black and white' background as opposed to a more beefy suckler family line. With potentially up to 1.1m animals coming from the dairy herd, this could impact animal potential in terms of carcass quality and carcass weight.

The real dilemma though is for the purchaser of calves at two to four weeks old. In most situations, you are faced with lively, shiny-coated calves that all look much the same.

What the buyer needs is a crystal ball to picture what that animal will look like at 18-24 months of age. That's when you really know what you have bought.

At a farm walk a few years ago, this was well demonstrated when we got the host farmer to put five or six of his dairy beef heifers, which were all around 20 months old, into the crush.

The most striking observation was the variation in size for animals that were of similar age and, more ironically, similarly priced when purchased as calves.

At the time, we estimated that there was potentially around 30kg difference in carcass weight between the largest and smallest in the batch. A potential difference at today's prices of around €140 between the two animals.

When you think of it though, it is not that surprising to see such variation. It is simply the expression of the genetics of the individual animal. The same variation is present in suckler progeny, but because they are traded at an older age, you have a much better idea of the animal's potential.

This was born out by work carried out by Michael Drennan in Teagasc Grange, which showed a high correlation between the conformation at the weanling stage and that of the finished animal.

Making an informed decision

The Commercial Beef Value (CBV) Index launched by ICBF, if used correctly, can take some of the guess work out of buying beef animals, whether they originated from dairy or suckler dams.

- The index will:
- Assess an individual calf's beefing genetic potential.
 - Focus on the beefing traits.



- Take into account terminal traits of the dam and sire.

- Could help differentiate the purchase value of the calf.

The last point is of particular relevance when buying dairy beef calves. It will certainly bring more truth to the old adage that 'you get what you pay for'.

How is the CBV made up?

The CBV is comprised of five traits from the Terminal Index that are important to a non-breeding beef (drystock) enterprise;

1. Carcass weight.
2. Carcass conformation.
3. Carcass fat.
4. Docility.
5. Feed intake.

How do I breed animals with a high CBV?

Animals with high carcass, docility and feed intake trait values will have the highest CBVs. Figure 1 shows the results from the Everycalf project on how sire and dam genetics will affect the beef merit of the animal.

The Dairy Beef Index (DBI) is used by dairy farmers to select beef bulls for use on dairy cows. It is broken down into two sub-indexes – calving and beef. Both are important to the dairy farmer. It is the beef sub-index that is important for the beef farmer. The higher the beef sub-index in the DBI of a bull, the higher the CBV of his progeny will be.

This can be seen in Table 1, which shows that Bull A and B are both from the same breed and have identi-

Figure 1: Significant impact of sire and dam EBV.

Sire and dam genetics had a significant impact - each +5kg increase CB = +7kg carcass.

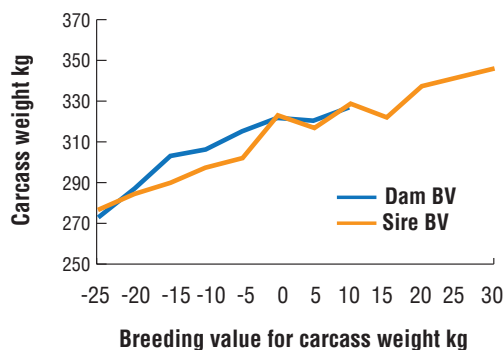
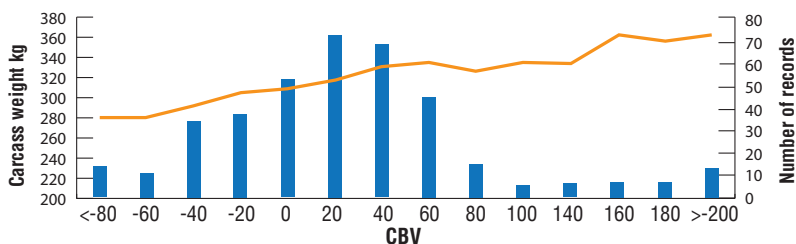




Figure 2: Carcass weight.



From a beef farmer’s perspective, buying calves with a known CBV will allow them to select calves at an early age with some confidence of beef merit. They can identify dairy farms producing calves with better CBV values based on their sire and dam genetics. They will then be able to differentiate between farms in terms of calf value.

It is still early days, but CBV certainly offers benefits to both dairy and beef farmers. It will focus the minds of breed societies and AI companies if they want to tap into the proven potential.

The EveryCalf Project looks at the rearing of male dairy beef calves on 10 commercial beef farms run by Teagasc and ICBF with the following objectives:

- Develop a model for specialised contract rearing of male dairy calves.
- Monitor animal performance from various genotypes within grass-based calf-to-beef systems on commercial rearing farms.
- Monitor grassland management, feed quality and parasitism impacts.
- Quantify inputs, costs and returns at each stage along the rearing chain.

cal DBI values of €119. Both bulls are classified as ‘moderate’ calving difficulty on dairy heifers, although bull A is slightly easier and has the better calving sub-index.

Bull B on the other hand has better beefing characteristics, potentially offering progeny with heavier carcasses and better conformation. Both bulls are suitable for use on dairy cows. For a purchaser of beef calves, the genetics of Bull B are more desirable.

The importance of selecting the right genetics.

As dairy farmers selling animals to beef farmers, it is important to understand what the CBV is and what it might tell you about the potential sale value of an animal.

There is an ever increasing onus on dairy farmers to improve the quality of beef calves coming from their

herds. Utilising the right genetics is key to achieving this. Selecting beef sires with a high beef sub-index (Bull B) component to the DBI is the first step in producing better performing, more efficient dairy x beef animals from your herd.

There is no question that CBV is working. Data from the calf rearing EveryCalf projects shows that as CBV values increase, so too does carcass weight and carcass conformation, as shown in Figure 2.

The challenge for the industry is to get both dairy farmers and beef farmers to understand how they can use CBV to their advantage, dairy farmers, from the point of view that selecting higher beef index bulls within the DBI will not impact on cow productivity, but will potentially leave them with a more saleable calf that will move off the farm sooner.

Table 1:

	DBI	Calving Value SI	Beef SI	Calving diff	Carcase weight kg	Carcase conformation
Bull A	€119	€59	€60	7.8%	+8kg	0.8
Bull B	€119	€38	€82	8.7%	+20kg	1.0