

Steers – Are They a Means to Diversify a Dairy Operation?

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Adding additional income streams to a dairy operation can be one way to improve cash flow. Of course, these additional enterprises need to provide extra income over the associated expenses, utilize land and labor resources efficiently, and not detract from the primary enterprise of generating income from the dairy's milking herd. At the 2021 Kentucky Dairy Partners Meeting, Jim Akers, CEO of Bluegrass Stockyards, discussed the merits and limitations of using Holstein steers and planned matings of Beef-on-Dairy steers for beef production. A summary of his comments and discussion follows.



Holstein Steers

Holstein steers have and will continue to fill a niche in the beef market. Depending on the number of pure-beef animals available for harvest, the market is sometimes better than at others. When markets get tight, dairy steers are the first segment that takes a hit financially. Also, only one packer is harvesting Holstein steers now, which eliminates completion for these finished animals. Holstein steers do grade well, but they have challenges when it comes to the shape of their ribeyes and feed conversion within the feedyard.

Beef Crosses - Not any Beef Bull Works

To produce a beef-dairy crossbred steer valued by the beef industry, breeding dairy cows to any beef bull will not work. Crossbred calves from an unplanned mating, known as “dirty Holsteins”, are worth less than straight Holsteins. The bull/sire used in a breeding program needs to be specifically selected for carcass and feedlot traits that match the needs and expectations of the beef-packing industry. Packers and feedyards are looking for a smaller framed animal that grade well, has a larger ribeye, and convert feed more efficiently. Female calves from these selected beef-on-dairy crosses will not be good replacements for dairy or beef herds as they have not been selected for the maternal traits needed in replacement females.

Beef-on-Dairy Matings

To produce a desirable offspring, matings need to be targeted to produce heifers or steers for their intended purpose, either as heifer replacements for your dairy herd or as beef-on-dairy steers for the feedlot. In this system, a proportion of the top cows/heifers are bred to female sexed dairy semen to produce the needed number of genetically superior, replacement dairy heifers. The remainder of cows are bred using a targeted breeding to specific beef semen to produce a beef-on-dairy steer with the traits needed/wanted by the feedyard and packer. These beef bulls do not have a lot of frame, but produce offspring that have the muscle shape and volume wanted by packers and the feed conversion needed in

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feedyards. These beef-on-dairy steer crosses may match or exceed the performance of a straight beef animal. These steers are raised on-feed, not grass, generally go to feedyards around 600 lbs, and are targeted to be harvested at around 14 months of age.

Marketing Beef from Dairy Cows

When marketing beef animals, reputation is important as well as having pot loads. These loads can result from multiple people working together to put together a load. The beef industry is looking for these beef-on-dairy crosses to fill voids made with the decreasing size of beef cow herds so as to maintain total beef production. Jim Akers made the statement, “Beef-on-dairy steers, resulting from planned breedings on the lower genetic end of the dairy herd may become the source of your next steak!”

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