



College of Agriculture  
and Life Sciences

Animal Science

## Is Dairy Crossbreeding Right for You?

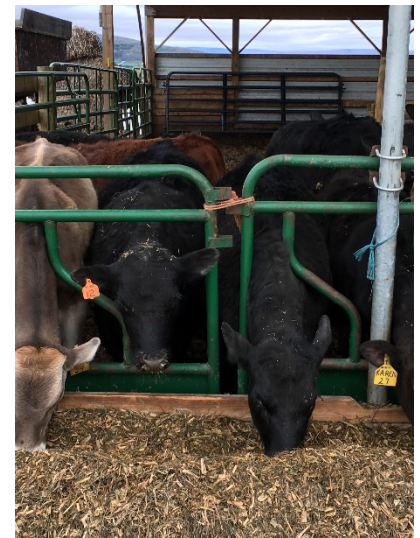
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Are you looking to generate a little more cash flow? Try breeding your low-end cows using beef semen. Dairy replacements are at a low value due to low milk prices and ample supply. According to Cornell/USDA Market News Reporters, well-muscled cross bred calves are bringing a \$50-100 premium to Holstein calves. There needs to be a farm-specific strategy for this to be advantageous. To learn more, I recently met with Hannah Worden and Claire Mulligan to hear about ABS's InFocus program. This is one of several companies with an approach this opportunity.

Each farm will need to come up with its individual plan. One of the first questions that will need to be answered, are you hanging on to cows that should be shipped? If so, count them out as culling will shift the number at the bottom. The goal is to breed the top cows to dairy, most likely sexed semen for improving the genetics, and bottom end cows to beef semen from bulls best suited for crossbreeding. These percentages will need to be worked out on each farm. The middle cows will be bred as usual. You will need to determine how many replacement heifers your farm needs, generally 80-85% of the herd. The rest of the calves can leave the farm as beef.

How do you figure out which cows have low genetic potential? One way is through genomic testing, which can run in the \$45 range. Another is through pedigree review. Your semen company can help you; either option accurate recordkeeping is critical. You want to make sure semen gets used on the proper cows.

When choosing a beef bull, it should complement the traits of the dairy cow. Dairy breeds are known for their marbling, but are lighter muscled with less desirable muscle conformation as compared to beef breeds. Select beef bulls with calving ease, moderate frames, heavy muscling, and above average rate of gain. Crossbreeding works with all dairy breeds, not just Holstein.



Calf on the left is straight bred steer, on the right is crossbred heifer.



There seems to be a difference of opinion on the conception rate using beef semen. Fertility may be diminished with the tail enders, while some feel beef semen improves the rate. Quality beef semen may cost more, but will be recouped.

Each and every calf born on the farm needs to be treated like a replacement: quality colostrum in a timely manner. As with replacement dairy heifer, immunity is critical when calves are to be raised as quality beef. Droopy calves will not bring a good price! These crossbreds also tend to be thriftier calves and may consume a lot of milk. Be aware they may want to hit the ground and get right up and want to nurse!

Calves will need to be identified as crossbreds to gain a better price than straight Holsteins. ABS has specific ear tags for their crosses, different color tags for calves from Holstein or Jersey cows. An

observation has been the calves that look “beefy” will bring a better price, too. Though not part of the reports, demand has been high and steady with little price fluctuation, according observations of two of Cornell/USDA Market News reporters. Reports can be found [here](#).

This concept has been around for several years, but is now gaining momentum. Some of the pieces are still coming into place. There are discussions underway with auction markets to hold special sales for these crossbred calves. There is also potential for pooling these calves or even holding graded (by USDA certified graders) sales. There are opportunities for farms to raise them, either as another income stream or a new enterprise. Some farms are utilizing old heifer facilities or old freestalls after exiting the dairy business. Options include raising them to weaning, up to 500 lbs. and to finished weight.



For additional information:

- Select Sires “Breeding to Feeding”, <http://www.selectsires.com/programs/breedingtofeeding.html?version=20170404>
- Genex “Breeding to Feeding”, <http://genex.crinet.com/page4653/BreedingToFeeding>
- ABS “In Focus”, <http://www.absglobal.com/ca/dairy/infocus/>

For more information about Beef Quality Assurance program contact [Katherine Brosnan](#) or [Mike Baker](#), or check out the [website](#).