

# Raising dairy beef crossbred cattle for market

*Long-term viability*



A project geared to preparing dairy beef crossbred calves for the feedlot in just over four months is a key component of a long-term strategy designed to make the province more self-sufficient in livestock.

As Les Halliday explains, the Canadian Agricultural Partnership project has the potential to benefit not only the bottom line for producers but reduce greenhouse gases and produce natural fertilizer for those who are growing crops. Les is the Beef Development Officer with the Department of Agriculture and Land. He explained the goal is to raise dairy/beef cross calves to larger and older animals rather than ship them out of province for veal.

He indicated the timing is right for several reasons. The Maritime Beef Council, in conjunction with Atlantic Beef Products Inc., is making an effort to increase the number of animals going into the plant. Halliday said this project has the potential to dovetail with that livestock strategy nicely and help ensure the long-term viability of the region's only federally inspected beef plant.

Another factor is the rising cost of raising dairy heifers to become milking cows, which can be in excess of \$3,000 per heifer. Producers usually keep all of the female calves as replacement heifers, meaning extra space, feed and labour is required until they have their first calving, usually at two years.

New technology like sexed semen means fewer females are needed to maintain the genetics of a milking herd. That means lower-producing cows can be diverted to supply calves for the beef market. Male dairy calves have traditionally entered the veal market as fed calves but if this project continues to duplicate its early success, males could also be grown to a larger weight and sent to the traditional beef market.

"They are started on feed as soon as they get to the nursery," Halliday explained.

Randy Drenth is one of the producers taking part in the project and he already had some experience with the concept in Ontario before he and his family moved to Summerfield. He began feeding his first group of Holsteins that are part of a feeding program consisting of whole corn and protein/mineral pellets. That diet is maintained when the animal is transferred from the nursery operation to the feedlot to achieve its finishing weight.

He said the project has the potential to create opportunities by changing the conventional wisdom that dairy cross animals could be ready for market in less than two years. In less than 15 months, the first animals had reached the 1,600-pound mark.

"This is a really intensive growth program," Randy explained.

Research in Ontario has shown dairy cross animals can increase their carcass weight and reduce days to market by up to ten per cent. Dairy beef cross animals also have a higher muscle-to-bone ratio and greater muscle conformation than straight Holsteins.

The Beef Development Officer noted the goal of the program is to develop data that is specific to PEI to help producers decide if it is both economically and environmentally feasible to raise dairy cross animals at their own operations.

Under the project, producers must provide authorization for the PEI Cattle Producers to verify the age and farm of the calf and all calves must have tags recognized by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Both Halliday and Drenth said they are pleased with the results they have seen so far. For Randy, it is proof the success he witnessed in Ontario can be duplicated in PEI. He also grows corn, so the project provides him with manure as a natural fertilizer.

"For us it is a win -win, all around," he said. "The cost may be a little higher at the outset, but it is definitely working for us."

