Cull your dairy cows on production

R.A. Bettenay
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Good production and breeding records are essential to allow effective culling of dairy cows, says Busselton Agricultural Adviser R. A. Bettenay, B.Sc. (Agric.) in this article, in which he outlines points to take into account when culling the herd.

Unfortunately many dairy farmers have such severe wastage that all heifers must be reared either to replace cows culled for disease or to build up herd size to keep pace with the increasing pasture area.

Such a high incidence of disease causes "culling from the top," as it is the high producers which are more susceptible to a number of diseases, including phosphate deficiency. Under these conditions it is difficult enough to maintain production, let alone improve it.

This article is directed to the more fortunate farmer who is herd testing and so knows the production of individual cows, and who is in a position to cull on production. In it, I will mention some of the factors to be taken into consideration when deciding which cows to cull and which to retain.

Importance of Records

Records should be kept in such a way that all information about a cow is available on the one sheet. This will include date of calving and production in all lactations, together with any appropriate comments such as attacks of mastitis and other diseases, temperament and ease of milking.

A folder and suitable "Cow Record Cards" are available from the Department of Agriculture at a small charge. The cards have space for name and identification, age and pedigree, of the cow, together with a breeding record and production record and space to identify her progeny.

It takes only a few minutes a year to keep the cards up to date. Their use is strongly recommended to take much of the guesswork out of your culling programme.

All too often farmers set a production standard, and cull all cows which fail to reach it. This technique does not give consideration to the many factors which may have influenced a particular lactation, and cannot be recommended.

All lactations, and not just the most recent, should be considered.

Heifers Produce Less

It is well known that heifers produce at a lower level than cows of similar...
breeding simply because they are younger. On the average, production increases with age until the cow is six years old, then declines more gradually year by year.

This does not mean that no heifer should be culled at the end of the first lactation and, in fact, in most herds there are a few obvious duds which could well be culled even before the end of the first lactation. It is unusual for a low-producing heifer to turn into a high-producing cow.

First, however you should take all factors into account and weigh the pros and cons:

Was the heifer poorly grown?
Did she calve at too young an age or at the wrong time of the year?
Did she suffer a set-back through disease or food shortage?
If the answer to any of these is yes she may deserve a second chance.
TIME OF CALVING IMPORTANT

Figures available from Grade Herd Recording have demonstrated very clearly that month of calving has a great influence on production in the conditions under which cows are run in the South West.

This is particularly important in herds which are not milked all the year round, and it would be as well to assess its importance under your own conditions of feeding and management.

Highest production is generally obtained from cows calving in April-May, with a progressive decline through to the end of the year.

In assessing the merit of a cow which calved late you must decide what allowance should be made under your conditions.

Perhaps more important, you should consider what time the cow will calve in her next lactation. Will she still be late or have you managed to bring her forward a month to six weeks? Is she good enough to warrant holding over unmated for a season in the hope of bringing her in at the right time the following year?

INFLUENCE OF DISEASE

Diseases influencing production may be temporary and non-recurring as, for instance, injuries or cow-pox, or recurrent in nature as with many forms of mastitis. In either case the occurrence of the diseases should be faithfully recorded in the remarks column of the cow's card so that full information is available when you are deciding which cows to cull.

You will find that some cows are very prone to mastitis and this must weigh heavily against them as they are likely to be sources of infection and a danger to the rest of the herd.

STOCKING RATE

If a low producing cow can be culled and replaced by one producing at a higher level there will obviously be an overall increase in production and in herd average. In some cases no replacement is available but, even in these circumstances, total production from the herd may be increased since the remaining cows will have more to eat and so will produce more unless the farm is already understocked.

BREEDING REPLACEMENTS

In most conditions it is wise to breed replacements rather than purchase cows from an outside source and perhaps find that they do not produce any more under your conditions than those sold as unprofitable.

Most of the differences in production between herds are the result of differences in feeding and management rather than breeding, and it is most unlikely that the purchase of a completely new herd would materially improve your production.

It is now recognised that there are potentially high, and low, producers in every herd.

Here again culling is important because of the long-term manner in which it determines which cows will be used for breeding future herd replacements.

For instance a cow may have passed her prime and be on the downgrade yet you know that she has been a good one and produces good calves. Provided that her production is not too far below the herd average she will be worth keeping as a breeding matron. It is doubtful whether it would pay to cull such a cow to make way for a heifer of unknown potential and perhaps from a lower producing cow.

It is a good principle to cull heavily in the early years of building up a herd, provided that replacements bred on the farm are available. As the herd average improves and high producing cows are obtained every effort should be made to keep them in production for as many lactations as possible.

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