DAIRY-BRED BEEF

Two case studies provide essential knowledge for turning surplus dairy calves to beef production as part of your system. **Peter Jones** explains

ABOVE: A group of 15-month-old dairy-bred cattle
BELOW: Toby Boyes with the Hereford cattle purchased from OLMC in October 2024

Over the past 10 years the number of beef breeding cows has steadily declined meaning there are less beef-bred stores available to graziers and finishers who have traditionally bought yearling store cattle in the Spring and finished them in the following autumn, winter and spring out of yards. The same pattern has evolved in the organic beef sector with organic producers finding store cattle harder to buy with the price of store cattle having increased and with finished cattle prices breaking all records.

These two factors have led the Organic Livestock Marketing Co-operative (OLMC) to take a fresh look at producing organic beef from dairy-bred calves supplied by organic dairy herds – a commodity that in the past has been frittered away into the conventional beef sector.

There are many challenges to making calves from this sector work. Generally, organic graziers and finishers favour native-bred cattle such as Aberdeen Angus, Hereford and North and South Devons that utilise grass and forage and only require a limited amount of concentrate in the finishing period. In fact, many producers comfortably finish native-bred cattle on a grass- and forage-only diet.

Dairy-bred cattle tend to be later maturing, being out of big Holstein or Friesian cows or crossbreds such as Brown Swiss, Fleckviehs or Montbeliardes. The bulls used are predominantly B Blues, Lims and Sims that are themselves later maturing breeds. However, increasing numbers of milk producers are using Aberdeen Angus and Hereford sires, which does tip the balance slightly towards more grass-efficient breeding. Nonetheless, the dairy-bred calves are a largely wasted product in the organic beef world and, although they need to be farmed slightly differently than native-bred cattle, can be very effectively used for organic beef production.

The recent surge in beef prices has also shed a different light on the economics of using dairy-bred calves. Up to two or three years ago, the economics of rearing dairy-bred calves was marginal but the upsurge in finished stock prices and the drop in concentrate costs has made this alternative to buying store cattle a viable option.

In recent months, OLMC have been researching the viability and practicalities of rearing dairy bred calves. They are finding renewed confidence in demand for organic beef from abattoirs, processors and retailers reflecting increased consumer demand. This has led to discussions with members and customers of the co-operative as to how production can be increased to meet demand.

Case study 1: Yeo Valley, Somerset

OLMC was grateful to Yeo Valley's Farm Manager, Richard Greaves, for putting on a farm walk for members of OLMC on the 14 May at their calf unit at Holt Farm, Blagdon. Yeo Valley have for some time reared some of the surplus beef-cross and pure dairy-bred calves. Being a pedigree Friesian herd, the quality of their beef-cross and pure-bred calves is excellent from a beef point of view.

The purpose of the visit was to show how dairy-bred

calves can be utilised organically for beef production. Richard was keen to point out that Yeo Valley run an integrated regenerative organic farming system and the utilisation of the surplus dairy calves is a key part of that system.

The visit started with a tour of the purpose-built calf unit where the surplus progeny of 320 spring and autumn calving cows are reared for the first 15 weeks of their lives. Richard described the system which is based round attention to detail and good husbandry. All the cows are milked immediately and the colostrum is scored using a Brix Refractometer to ensure that all the calves get high quality colostrum. The calves are fed three litres of colostrum within four hours of birth.

The calves are group housed from day one, 15 in each group. Water is available immediately and rearer nuts and chopped straw in racks are introduced in the first week. The calves are fed three litres of milk twice daily for 12 weeks.

The calves are either pure Friesians or AA cross with a few Red Devons being born later in the year as a trial. Depending on the time of year the calves are born, they get two summers of grass and are finished in 20 to 25 months.

Case study 2: The Boyle family, Devon

OLMC are also working with Peter and Sam Boyles and their son Toby who farm in Devon. They recently reduced their sheep numbers and wanted a new enterprise to run alongside their Red Devon suckler herd. Last October, they purchased 21 Hereford calves from an organic dairy herd at £320 per head. They were reared on organic milk replacer for 12 weeks and had access to adlib concentrate and straw throughout. The calves were turned out in late April 2025 being about 8 months old. They are happily grazing and weigh somewhere between 250 to 300kg now. They are being fed 2kg of concentrate at grass to keep growth rates up. The aim is to sell the cattle at 18 to 20 months as forward stores at around 500kg.

The Boyles family have bought a further 23 calves, this time B Blues from an organic dairy herd at £600 per head. Once again the plan is to keep them until they are 500kg and sell as forward stores to an organic finisher.

The chart below shows the likely costings. It has been done in conjunction with Peter and Sam Boyles and Peter Jones of OLMC. While every farm is different and consequently costs vary it acts as a guide to where costs could be.

ABOVE: Peter Jones-Director of OLMC and Peter Jones Livestock
BELOW: Toby and Sam Boyles with a group of recently purchased calves

New enterprises

OLMC are able to market larger numbers of cattle both forward stores and finished cattle to meet demand and have a ready supply of organic calves. Why not take advantage of this opportunity to start a new enterprise or expand an existing beef system? OF

Peter Jones is a director of OLMC and Peter Jones Livestock

Dairy beef costs

Approximate costings for organic dairy beef bought in as calves and sold at 18-20 months as a store

MARCH-BORN CALF DELIVERED IN APRIL	£600	
CALF REARING COSTS		
Milk replacer	£140	
Concentrate	£80	
Straw	£40.00	
Vet	£30.00	
Mortality	£20.00	
FIRST SUMMER		
Concentrate	£40.00	
Grass	£40.00	
FIRST WINTER		
Silage	£130.00	
Concentrate	£80.00	
Straw	£25.00	
SECOND SUMMER		
Grass	£60.00	
Vet	£15.00	
TOTAL COST		£1,300.00
Sale price 18–20 month store @500 kgs		£1,750.00
Margin		£450