Six Tips for Choosing Which Heifers to Raise

- August 21, 2020
- Genetic Progress

When calvings are more abundant, like in August and September, you may wish to select which heifers are more valuable to keep in the herd.This is especially important when forage inventories are at an all time low in certain regions. Each heifer bred will consume, on average, over $1,200* worth of forage to get to her first calving!



To optimize selection and heifer raising costs, it is helpful to determine how many heifers you will need and to make good use of the tools at your disposal.

The six tips below can help you to choose the best heifers to raise.

1- Consult your herd’s genetic inventory

Producers enrolled in milk recording benefit from access to genetic indexes based on the parents and the dam’s performance. Genetic indexes are the fundamental data to be consulted to objectively select females. Various tools, such as Compass, will allow you to create lists of females in order of their genetic index. During the milk-recording visit, your Lactanet technician will update the herd cow inventory and can do the same for heifers in order to produce up to date lists.

2- Choose economic criteria

Concentrate on the criteria that will result in cows that are both profitable and functional. Your initial sort can be based on your choice of

the Pro$ or IPV index. Yield and milk fat are also good indexes to consult to produce milk which is better adapted to the market. The majority of producers also retain functional criteria such as mastitis resistance, fertility of females and health criteria.

3- What to choose at breeding

It is common to use sexed semen to get heifers from select dams in the herd. This strategy also involves the use of beef semen on the least desirable cows to produce calves with added value. Compass offers suggestions for the use of sexed semen, conventional semen and beef semen for every female in the herd over one year old.

Compass Herd Inventory List - Active Animals

	Full Name	Visible ID	Birth Date	LPI	MILK	%F	Latest DIM	Latest 305d Milk
SS	DODGE COROLLA	000325	17-11-16	2741	814	.03	232	11717
CS	DODGE ROSOLO	003205	11-10-16	2579	-532	.29	290	8687
SS	LENNON ADDIE	000948	14-09-16	2683	246	.37	241	10941
SS	ACCURATE CAMY	009180	07-07-16	2779	985	.09	320	11289
BF	UNO SALVATOR	004184	05-05-16	2270	-867	.41	446	8413
CS	BRINA MERRICK	008148	23-04-16	2425	660	-.12	223	10380
SS	LUCILLE STRONG	002497	13-01-16	2556	996	-.04	46	11054
BF	BRADNICK MADRID	002354	01-12-15	2235	-87	-.3	32	7303
SS	SABINE CALANDO	002495	12-11-15	2367	824	.18	177	12780
BF	SEAVER MELISANDRE	000388	31-10-15	2087	-727	-.06	322	9818

Figure 1: Compass proposes a choice of semen type (Sexed=SS, Conventional =CS or Beef = BS) for every female. The columns displayed can be personalized.

4- Plan breedings and manage inventories

Planning allows heifers to calve in a more constant manner. For example, if you need 36 heifers per year, or an average of three heifers per month, and you have a dozen dairy heifers born in August and September, you will have a surplus of heifers to choose from! It is advisable to plan the number of heifers to be born over a given period (monthly or quarterly). You will need to spread out the doses of sexed and beef semen to avoid occasional heifer shortages or surpluses. An appropriate range of heifer

ages facilitates a continuous supply of young cows in production to meet your needs.

5- Genotype heifers that have intermediate indexes

It is easy to conclude that a heifer with a Pro$ index of 2,200 should be raised as compared to one with a Pro$ index of 1,000. For heifers with intermediate values however, genotyping can provide more precise indexes that can improve on decision making.

Compass Herd Inventory List - Active Animals

Full Name	Birth Date	Pro$	MILK	FAT	%F	SCS	DF
YAMASKA SISAL	14-07-20	1840	716	67	.36	104	99
KANSASCITY MACKY	13-07-20	1932	704	69	.38	104	102
ORIGIN DEBBIE	07-07-20	2118	1294	77	.25	102	100
FOX ANGELIKA	06-07-20	1247	1008	29	-.08	101	100
FOX BEASTY	06-07-20	1278	654	33	.07	102	102
ORIGIN ELIZATE	30-06-20	2125	1235	85	.34	102	98
RIVERBEND PANDORA	23-06-20	1419	847	50	.16	99	104
JUDGE BASILIKA	22-06-20	1517	1005	43	.04	103	100
DRASTIC TULIPEAU	09-06-20	1803	823	31	0	105	104
DRASTIC LAURELA	06-06-20	1527	603	31	.07	104	103

Figure 2: A list of heifers, sorted by birth date produced with the help of Compass. The Pro$ index shows some good selection opportunities: those with scores under 1,400 are candidates for elimination and those between 1,400 and 2,000 should be genotyped.

6- Record health events

The observation of heifers and accurate record keeping of health events will help you to clarify and improve how you manage your heifer choices. For example, you may choose to eliminate heifers that were very sick at a young age even if they are not low on the list.

Every manager should establish their own criteria and be aware of the resources available to them to make the best possible choices. Setting up a carefully thought out selection strategy that involves the consultation of

genetic indexes and other pertinent data is recommended to reduce heifer raising costs and forage consumption. It will also ensure that you raise the best candidates with the most potential for becoming profitable cows.

*Source : René Roy based on data from the Agritel database.

By Mario Séguin