Surge in domestic attention towards dairy beef and veal as export interest in dairy-bred bull calves collapses

A report issued today by the main stakeholders in UK calf welfare confirms the extent of their success over the past seven years. The Beyond Calf Exports Stakeholders Forum has been working to improve the welfare of male calves since its launch in 2006. And it has demonstrated what can be done when the expertise of retailers, farmers, processors and non-governmental organisations is united and they work together to achieve agreed goals.

The Beyond Calf Exports Stakeholders Forum has, by helping to underpin a lift in the value of calves in the UK, secured a reduction in the number of male dairy calves shot at birth or exported live to veal farms on the Continent. The report shows that:

- Since 2006, the number of male dairy calves retained in Great Britain rose from 245,586 to 390,140 per annum. This is a rise of 58% and represents 86% of male calves born.
- The number of calves killed on farm reduced from 84,817 to 54,670 and now represents 12% of those born in Britain.
- The number of live calves being exported to the Continent has reduced by 90% since 2006 to less than 8,000.

However, there is still a need for the continued efforts of all those involved because:

- Some £100 million a year in sales is being lost to the beef and dairy sectors because up to 100,000 calves are still being killed before they have a chance to realise their real economic worth.
- TB movement controls remain an impediment to progress because 35,000 of the 100,000 calves lost are held up on TB restricted farms.

Speaking at a roundtable event today, Professor John Webster, Emeritus Professor of Animal Husbandry at the University of Bristol, said: "In 2006, more than a third of all male dairy calves born were either exported or shot at birth. Now, fewer than 15%
suffer this fate, which is good for their welfare, British farmers and consumers.

“This turn around in the calf industry has been achieved through new markets opening up for veal and beef. The report highlights over ten different case studies from retailers, processors and farmers that have created new markets for male calves."

Robert Forster, former head of the National Beef Association, speaking at the event today, said: "The key was to find realistic, and economically viable, domestic options that would make the export market for dairy bred calves virtually redundant.

"Dairy farmers, processors and retailers were made aware of the advantages of drawing more of these calves into domestic beef rearing and finishing systems so they could make a direct, and important, contribution to increases in farm income and improvements to the agricultural economy."

The Forum’s final report underlines the widespread commitment of leading retailers, farming groups and other food industry stakeholders to see an increased number of male dairy calves reared for the UK beef industry.

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Editors Notes
Please find below, additional quotes from Calf Forum stakeholders:

Philip Lymbery at Compassion in World Farming, CEO:
"The Forum has met its goals of giving dairy bull calves a future that they simply didn't have seven years ago. I want to congratulate all of the stakeholders for the incredible problem-solving skills they have shown and their openness.

"This is a model for the future. There may have been many challenges on the way, but it has been hugely impactful in terms of numbers of animals whose lives we have improved."

David Bowles at the RSPCA Head of Public Affairs:
"The Forum has shown that all sides in the live export debate can work together to
achieve success. Around 150,000 male dairy calves now have better welfare than in 2006. However with some £100 million still being lost to the beef industry through calves not being reared on, there is still work to do and we hope that this report will give ideas and guidance to open up new markets in the future."

Ciara Gorst, at the Co-op, Senior Technical Manager:  
"The Co-operative is proud to support the aims and vision of the Beyond Calf Exports Stakeholders Forum. Through The Co-operative Dairy Group launched in August 2011, we are committed to supporting the aims of the Forum in finding sustainable and practical solutions for black and white male dairy calves. We are supporting and working in partnership with our dairy and beef farmers through our Farming Groups to identify and develop market opportunities for home produced beef from male dairy calves and to integrate our dairy and beef chains. The foundation for this will be our own Food Ethical Policy, with a focus on animal welfare, environmental and sustainable aims. We support the Calf Forum and its role in bringing the industry together to tackle challenges with black and white male dairy calves. We will work with our dairy group of approximately 220 farmers and our processor through ongoing workshops, sharing knowledge and best practice between farmers to address challenges within the industry."

Marco Winters at DairyCo, Head of Genetics:  
"Genetics has a key role to play in determining the beef potential of dairy-bred bull calves. For more than a decade, the weighting of selection within the UK system of genetic evaluations (Profitable Lifetime Index) has increasingly been directed towards fitness traits. We are now seeing the benefits feed through into the national dairy herd. Increasing robustness in the dairy cow has a positive impact on cow welfare, but also on the quality of the bull calf produced. Within the next couple of years, further work funded by DairyCo and EBLEX will deliver estimated breeding values (EBV's) for carcass traits in dairy and beef sires. This will enable dairy farmers to consider the beef potential of the male progeny, when deciding on which dairy sires to use in their herd. DairyCo welcomed the opportunity to participate in the Beyond Calf Exports Stakeholders Forum, which provided a very constructive environment to discuss how the range of potential solutions available could be implemented by the industry."

Lyndsay Chapman at Dairy Crest, Director of Agriculture and Communications:  
"Dairy Crest is pleased to have been involved with the Forum since its launch. Improving the viability of production systems that utilise dairy bull calves is really important and these results are a significant achievement. The work of the Forum has enabled us to demonstrate how, as a joined up supply chain, we are taking steps to improve animal welfare and on farm efficiency. This is key to maintaining consumer confidence and the future sustainability of the dairy sector."

Sophie Stoye, at FAI, says:  
“Our view is that the Calf Forum has certainly raised the profile of dairy calves and associated welfare problems and has had a significant impact on reducing calf exports, which could have returned to 2006-2008 levels following the disease issues which halted exports in 2009/10. However, although the number of calves shot on farm has reduced, this is not likely to be a continuing trend unless the genetics of the cow is addressed. This would also reduce the risk of poor welfare in the cow which is sorely needed."

Philip Gibson at M&S:  
“Marks & Spencer is pleased to have been involved in the Beyond Calf Exports Stakeholders Forum. We fully support the aims of the Forum and believe that the
development of production systems that utilise male dairy calves makes sense for welfare and sustainability reasons. We have worked with our suppliers to develop high welfare rose veal production in the UK, utilising male dairy calves to provide a high quality product for our customers, and we will continue to seek other opportunities moving forward."

Joy Clachan at McDonald’s, UK Agriculture Manager:

“McDonald’s UK welcomes the success of the Beyond Calf Exports Stakeholders Forum. We actively encourage the use of male dairy cattle in our supply chain and work closely with our suppliers to create a market for beef produced from male dairy cattle. Whole cuts from the forequarter and flank of dairy bulls now account for approximately one tenth of the 100% British and Irish beef used across our menu.”

Andrew Loftus at Morrisons, Agriculture Manager:

“Morrisons fully supports the objectives of the calf forum. Through our wholly-owned meat processing subsidiary we currently process over 18,000 male dairy calves each year, making a major and direct contribution to the aims of the forum. We expect this number to rise significantly over the next two years and we have recently launched a major initiative in partnership with Arla Foods and McDonald’s Restaurants to source even greater numbers of male dairy calves from the South West of England. We plan to roll out this initiative across the UK next year.”

Simon Fryar, Meadow Quality:

“The forum has completed some sterling work, but we must recognise that it’s work has been set against a background of improving beef prices and returns and we cannot rest on our laurels – should the economics of beef or veal production suffer, so too will the future welfare implications for male dairy calves”.

George Jamieson, NFU Scotland:

“The Calf Forum is an excellent example of a constructive and progressive initiative including a real variety of organisations, delivering well considered solutions with clear outcomes. The value of beef from the dairy sector is clear, certainly to NFU Scotland and the Forum has helped to highlight technical and commercial initiatives which have helped to make further progress in ensuring the value of dairy beef is captured.”

Peter Savidge at OMSCo, Head of Membership:

“OMSCo have appreciated the opportunity to share knowledge and expertise across the chain, and to explore solutions. For our members TB restrictions will remain the single big reason why viable male calves remain at risk.”

Tim Brigstocke, Policy Director, RABDF:

“RABDF as the only UK wide charity solely involved in the dairy farming sector welcomes any activity that will help create a sustainable and profitable dairy farming sector. The Beyond Calf Exports Stakeholders Forum is also a really good example of everyone working together to mutual advantage coming up with some new approaches to deal with a real problem.”

Alice Swift at Sainsbury’s, Agriculture Manager Beef and Dairy:

“Sainsbury’s has played an active part in the Calf Forum since its beginnings and has enjoyed participating in such a constructive platform. Since 2007 Sainsbury’s has developed a number of successful initiatives to promote sustainable dairy farming,
including a black and white bull calf scheme. Prior to 2012, the majority of our calves were reared as bull beef but following the growing demand for British veal this has changed. In 2012, we recognised the need to offer customers a British veal range in a large number of stores. We established our Veal Development Group and recruited eight farms to rear calves exclusively for veal. We are now one of the largest retailers of British veal ensuring the long-term viability of, and a future market for, black and white bull calves.”

Liz Bowles at Soil Association, Head of Farming:
“Delighted that the number of bull calves being reared has increased over the last few years and welcome the work that the Forum has done in highlighting the problems associated with finding suitable markets for these animals. However more work is still required to encourage a greater uptake of more dual type breeds within dairy farmers breeding programmes to prevent any unwanted calves being born. An additional key way of addressing the issue is obviously a greater uptake of sexed semen amongst dairy farmers.”

Professor Mike Coffey at SRUC:
“We are happy to have been involved with the Forum from the outset and were particularly keen to see genetic improvement of Holstein bull calves for muscularity as a method for improving their value to the beef chain. This has been brought to reality by funding from DairyCo, Eblex and HCC to produce carcass trait EBVs from abattoir data. These will be available by 2015 and will enable dairy farmers to breed animals that will produce good returns from milk production but also from the male calves that go into beef production. A long term breeding solution alongside short term strategic options will ensure more male Holstein calves enter the food chain as a valuable asset. The Beyond Calf Exports Stakeholders Forum is to be congratulated in achieving these outcomes over its lifetime.”

Graham Wilkinson at Tesco, Agriculture Manager, Dairy:
“At Tesco we’re committed to securing a sustainable dairy industry, and to be truly sustainable the industry must take responsibility for its bull calves. Through the Tesco Sustainable Dairy Group, we have opened up a market for previously unwanted dairy bull calves, where our 700 milk farmers can now claim £40 per head for all Aberdeen Angus calves sired by bulls that were selected for easy calving. These bull calves can then be sold as beef under our finest* brand, which is good news for farmers and customers alike. Through the Tesco Dairy Centre of Excellence at Liverpool University, we are also looking at how we can improve calf welfare through diet and approaches to feeding. Best practice can then be shared with all Tesco Sustainable Dairy Group members, continually improving welfare across the industry.”

Duncan Sinclair at Waitrose, Agriculture Manager:

"Waitrose and Dovecote Park have actively participated in the work of the Beyond Calf Exports Forum since its launch in 2006. We fully support the aims of the Forum and have been pleased to work with the other stakeholders in the group to achieve them. Since the Forum’s launch, Waitrose has worked with both our beef and dairy farmers to create a dedicated high welfare veal supply chain for the male dairy calves born on the farms in our dedicated milk pool. The scheme will provide a long term sustainable outlet for these calves, which we will continue to develop and improve in the future.”