

Has your herd got the 'red factor'?

Red ladies in the limelight

Just why are red-and white Holstein genetics seeing such a growth in demand? Is it just a trend, fuelled by anecdotal claims of better health, fertility and productivity? Or is there real hard evidence that red is indeed better, if not best?

text **Rachael Porter**

Perhaps 'red fever' has yet to hit you and your herd. Or perhaps you've just served a batch of cows or heifers using a red-and white Holstein sire for the first time?

If your herd falls into the latter category then intrigue and curiosity, possibly fired by seeing a red-and-white heifers fall under the hammer at the local livestock auction for considerably more than her black-and-white counterparts, may have been the catalyst.

But why are red-and-white genetics so sought after these days that stock command a premium in the sale ring? And why are red-and white Holstein semen sales at an all time high?

Who better to ask these questions than CRV's head of breeding programmes in Western Europe Pieter van Goor.

Growing popularity

The organisation has seen red-and-white Holstein semen sales increase steadily since the 1990s. In 2005 18.2% of all first inseminations were made using a red-and-white sire. In 2009 this figure stood at 22.9% and, according to Mr van Goor, it's still growing. He's expecting growth of between 1% and 2% per year for the foreseeable future.

"Both black-and-white Holstein and red-and-white Holstein herds are using the red-and-white sires. Bulls such as Classic,

Spencer and Fidelity are seen by them as a useful 'outcross' to avoid possible inbreeding. But what is really different today is that these bulls are able to hold their own in the proof rankings against the black-and-white sires. They can compete," says Mr van Goor.

"So rather than going down the MRI, Swedish Red or Brown Swiss route to improve milk components, for example, they can get an outcross that boosts protein yield and some hybrid vigour by using red-and-white Holstein genetics."

That said, most of the Netherland's red-and-white Holsteins get their 'red factor' from the MRI breed. So Mr van Goor believes that the red-and-white Holstein popularity comes from the fact that they're more robust, muscular cattle than their black-and-white counterparts. "They are able to hold their condition after calving a better – a standard deviation of +1 – and, therefore, the perception is that they can look after themselves and not just produce milk at the expense of everything else. And they can get back into calf more easily. Their scores certainly indicate that they're

Three 'red' generations (from left to right): Beautiful daughter Fatima, national Dutch champion Tulip daughter Flora and Andries daughter Florina



a little better than black-and-white Holsteins on fertility.”

Looking at milk components, the Netherlands has figures that show that red-and-white Holsteins, on average, produce more protein than black-and-white Holsteins. The average red-and-white protein percentage currently stands at 3.57%, compared to the black-and-white figure of 3.49% – almost a whole percentage point difference.

For some, the choice to breed and milk red-and-white Holsteins is more ‘emotional’. Perhaps their family has always milked them and they’re simply carrying on a tradition.

“This isn’t so important for the black-and-white Holstein herds – they’re happy to give the red-and-white genetics a whirl,” says Mr van Goor.

Management benefits

One UK-based producer with a passion for red-and-white Holsteins is Chris Weaver, who runs his 220-strong herd at Villa Farm, near Whitchurch in Shropshire.

Around 25% of his Holstein herd, which is currently averaging 9,500 litres at 4.10% butterfat and 3.35% protein with a somatic cell count of 114,000cells/ml, is made up of red-and-white cattle.

Mr Weaver set up a black-and-white herd 35 years ago, which included a few cows that carried the red factor gene. “There

weren’t any red-and-white sires around, so the herd remained stayed black-and-white for a while. But I did want to use red-and-white sires on the red-factor cattle in the herd,” explains Mr Weaver. Then along came red-and-white Holstein bull Supreme and things have changed considerably during the past 10 years or so. Today red-and-white cows and heifers in the herd now number 60 and this is mainly thanks to the Dutch and their breeding programme.

“In my view they have some of the best red-and-white genetics in the world,” adds Mr Weaver. “And I can certainly see a time when at least 50% of our herd is red and white.”

Mr Weaver says he’s always preferred red-and-white cows and admits that there’s an emotional issue there: “I was born and raised with red-and-white cows.”

But he says that there are herd management benefits too. “The red-and-white Holsteins are definitely more placid. They have a quiet temperament and I think that their feet and legs are also better.

“They can also hold their own compared to the black-and-white Holsteins in terms of milk production, often offering a plus on milk, fat and protein.”

The red-and-white semen he uses on his herd comes from Avoncroft and he’s serving heifers with Classic and Fidelity

at the moment. Past sires include Beautiful, who lived up to his name and has left Mr Weaver with some good cows. He’s also used Kian, Curtis and Genus bull Faithful.

“If the market prices paid for red-and-white Holstein cows and heifers are anything to go by, I think many producers share my views.”

Mr Weaver says that he says that some of this trend could be a due to the novelty factor for black-and-white herds: “It’s nice to have something different to look at, but then I also think that red-and-white Holsteins do offer a wide – and different – genetic pool to select from compared to the black-and-white Holsteins.”

Broader appeal

It’s this outcross that’s proving the clincher for many black-and-white herds that are now using red-and-white genetics, according to Avoncroft’s David Matthews.

Between 18 and 20% of his company’s semen sales are red-and-white sires and growth has been strong for the past four years.

“There’s always been a niche market there, but the red-and-white Holsteins seem to have much broader appeal now.”

He has three types of customer, either established red-and-white herds, Ayrshire herds looking for a first cross to increased milk production, or black-and-white herds looking for an outcross and the hybrid vigour in both the type and production that come with that.

“It’s largely anecdotal, but users claim that they offer greater robustness and good feet and legs and health traits. And they also say that they hold body condition a little better than black-and-white Holsteins and the bulls proofs show that some do, indeed, offer more milk components – particularly protein,” says Mr Matthews.

Bull proofs are what it’s about. And they’re proof that there’s reason behind the ‘red fever’.

CRV has a dedicated red-and-white Holstein nucleus herd and breeding programme, which also uses genetic marker information.

More bulls are coming through all the time and some are even surpassing their black-and-white counterparts in the sire rankings. So dominance in the sale ring looks set to continue. And if the figures do stack up – in terms of longevity and productivity – then prices could rise even more. |

