

Should you consider 'beefing up' profits with a second income?

Call to help 'meat' demand

We spoke to one of England's largest beef producers and discover that Angus-cross calves from the UK dairy herd represent an opportunity for dairy and beef producers alike.

text **Rachael Porter**



Kirsty and Paul Westaway and their Angus-cross beef herd

Half of the UK's beef comes from the dairy herd, but the beef industry wants more. And this 'more', if it's in the form of Angus crosses, represents a huge and exciting opportunity for UK producers, according to Blade's Richard Phelps.

His Somerset-based company has more than 16,000 head of cattle on units throughout England, making it one of the largest beef farming operations in the country.

"Demand for beef produced through the franchise is increasing," says Mr Phelps. "And there's currently a shortage of Angus crosses – to the tune of around 300 head per week."

Blade's retail and food service arm – RWM – supplies a leading supermarket chain and several London-based wholesalers. They have the capacity to take around 400 head of finished Angus-cross cattle each week and at the moment just 100 are being supplied by Blade. "So we want to supply more, obviously. And we need dairy producers to help us do that."

Holstein Angus calves: this cross is producing beef with the eating quality and taste that consumers are demanding

The company is looking to buy Holstein Angus-cross calves – sired by registered Angus bulls and aged between two and three weeks old – from across England and Wales to feed into its contract rearing system.

"This cross is producing the meat that consumers are demanding. It has excellent eating quality – meat is marbled with fat, which makes it juicy and tasty," says Mr Phelps. The cross is popular with Brazilian, Argentinean and US beef producers and it part of the reason why these countries have successful beef industries. "And the UK industry can have a slice of that if we

produce more Angus crosses. That way we'll be able to compete and ensure that buyers and supermarkets buy UK beef.

"It will be the beef that its customers are demanding and the UK will be able to supply enough of it, so they won't need to look abroad."

UK-produced beef

Provenance is also helping here. Consumers are increasingly interested in where their food comes from and prefer to buy 'local' and UK-produced beef.

"So we want to build up the UK's stocks of Angus-cross beef to the tune of more than 20,000 head per year," adds Mr Phelps.

Paul Westaway is one contract rearer who's helping to swell the number of Angus cross cattle. He runs a 60-hectare beef unit at Dymock, in Gloucestershire, and has been finishing Angus-cross cattle since he set up his beef unit in 2006.

"At that time we were looking for a scheme with added value. We looked to see



what the markets and consumer were demanding and we could already see a market for Holstein Angus cross beef, so that's what we decided to produce – it was our focus back then and, as demand has continued to grow, it's still our focus," he says.

Mr Westaway buys his calves from a local dairy farm, through Blade, at around 12 weeks of age. A contract is drawn up with Blade, which guarantees a price for the cattle when they're ready for slaughter – at between 16 and 17 months when reared on his grass-and-forage based system. He only buys heifer calves as they are best suited to his set up.

"Blade has contracts with dairy producers who want to sell Angus-cross calves, dairy producers who want to rear their own calves and sell them as stores or finished cattle, and beef producers like me, who buy the calves from their contracted dairy producers to finish them," he explains.

'Marbling' fat from Holstein

Calf prices are good, with Angus crosses commanding around £190 for a heifer and £210 for a bull calf.

And Mr Westaway says that the prices he sees for his finished cattle are similarly impressive and he's making a profit – something that beef producers have

struggled to do in recent years. "And the beauty of it is that it's all so simple. There's no complicated feeding or breeding required.

"The cross is early maturing and ready for slaughter in less than 18 months and the cattle just seem to have what the beef market demands – good intramuscular fat and eating quality."

The intra-muscular, 'marbling' fat comes from the Holstein, believe it or not.

"You can't see it in a Holstein cow, but it's there. When she's crossed with an Angus bull, some magic happens as far as eating quality is concerned," says Mr Westaway.

And it's not all about the consumer – there's good news for dairy producers too. The Angus offers a shorter gestation length than other beef bulls – 3 or 4 days shorter, according to Richard Phelps.

"Calvings are also easy as the calves are not huge when they're born," adds Mr Westaway. He also breeds cattle and has never had to assist a calving.

"Using an Angus bull, perhaps on the lower genetic merit proportion of your herd, can help producers avoid difficult calvings, as well as the health and fertility problems that can result."

He says that the guaranteed price for these resultant calves can also help producers to justify the higher cost of

using sexed semen on the high genetic merit cows in their herd. This helps to guarantee a crop of replacement heifers and also helps to speed up the rate of genetic gain.

"We're not dairy producers but we're thrilled with how well our beef business is going and have no regrets about taking the plunge in 2006," says Mr Westaway.

Exploded demand

"Our contract gives us some price security, but we also know that we're producing beef cattle that the market wants.

"In fact demand has really exploded during the past few months. I'd recommend any dairy producers who are looking for a second income from their herd to give Blade a call."

"You'll be helped every step of the way, from sourcing Angus bull semen through to finding a local rearer to buy your calves," Mr Westaway adds.

"I believe that it's an opportunity not to be missed and it's a chance for dairy and beef producers to work together to strengthen the UK industry." |

➤ For more information about Blade and for contact details, should you wish to start producing Angus-cross calves for the beef market, visit www.blade-farming.com

