

Using crossbred bulls, the differences between dairy farming in New Zealand and in the Netherlands

For my final thesis I went to New Zealand to do a research about the use of crossbred bulls. When I came there soon I found out that there were lots of differences between dairy farming in New Zealand and the Netherlands. Some are also causing problems for the development of the research. What are the biggest differences between dairy farming in New Zealand and in the Netherlands, why was the project done and how did it develop?

Where farming is controlled in the Netherlands because of keeping cows inside, feeding concentrates and having a year round calving system, farming in New Zealand is much more dependent on the environment and the weather conditions. Cows in New Zealand are mostly kept outside the whole year round, their ration is grass based and a strict calving season is maintained. Because of this system the grass growth, and with that the feed intake and the milk production is totally dependent on the weather. Other important issues influenced by the weather and the feed intake are health and fertility. Next to the weather the environment is also playing a big role in these issues. Some areas can be really steep or the cows have to walk quite a distance to the milking shed. Strong healthy feet are important for that.

Looking at those differences between dairy farming in the Netherlands and New Zealand it is quite clear that a different type of cow is needed. Where Dutch farmers like a big high producing Holstein-Friesian with a good quality big udder New Zealand farmers rather have a bit smaller compact dairy cow which can cope with the different environments and weather conditions and which is an efficient converter of grass into milk. In both countries the Holstein-Friesian is a breed that is used very often. In the Netherlands this breed is giving what is expected, a big cow with a good quality big udder and a high milk production. But although they seem to be the best milk producers they are not always strong enough for New Zealand conditions. This is why farmers in New Zealand started to cross breed Holstein-Friesian cows with Jerseys, an other important breed in New Zealand, during the 80's. New Zealand dairy farmers do see Jersey cows as a stronger breed which can better cope with the different environments and weather conditions. Other strong points of Jerseys are their stronger feet and udders, their small size, they are good efficient converters of grass into milk production and their milk solid production is higher than that of the Holstein-Friesian. With combining those two breeds dairy farmers of New Zealand where trying to get the best of both breeds in one cow, an allround cow that can cope with the different circumstances and which will have a good milk production.

Because farmers where having such good results with crossing those different breeds some New Zealand breeding companies where introducing crossbred bulls in 2002. Farmers became interested in those bulls and started to use them on their herds. Using crossbred bulls meant less time spending selecting bulls from different breeds and less variability in the herd because of different breed compositions. But seven years after the introduction of the first crossbred bulls some people questioned the results of those bulls. Did they really made everything better and easier? And did they gave the result the farmers wanted?

For CRV AmBreed this is an important question that need to be answered. Are they on the right way with the crossbred bulls, are they making a mistake going on with breeding

with those crossbred bulls, does the whole concept need any improvement, and how? So the idea was to make an analysis of how the progeny of the crossbred bulls do perform in the national dairy herds. Analysis about the TOP traits (traits other than production) and the milk production results had to be made.

But because dairy farming in New Zealand is so different to that in the Netherlands it is really important to get the right view on the situation before doing a research. It is important to know how those farmers think, what they want and how they make certain decisions. To get an idea about that farmers and field experts were interviewed and a desk study was done. Soon during this phase of the project there was found out that it was almost impossible to get enough TOP trait and milk production data of the progeny of the crossbred bulls. This was because not much farmers are letting their cattle getting analyzed and it was hard to get the data from the national database. This national database is owned by the competitor of CRV AmBreed which means that they have to pay for all the info they want to have from this database. So although New Zealand is a western country also, it still is a whole different country with a very different situation.

Because a research still needed to be done and CRV AmBreed did want an answer how to go on with the crossbred bulls there was decided to do the research based on farmers opinion. So more farmers and other experts were interviewed and in the end a conclusion was drawn. Although the research did need a few adjustments at CRV AmBreed they were really satisfied. They do have an idea about how to go on with the crossbred bulls now, but if possible there still needs to be done a proper analysis about the real performance of the crossbred bull progeny.

Having an experience like this in a foreign country is mostly a once in a lifetime experience. It is really good to get an other view on things, to see an other system and to learn from that. Also coming in contact with people from 'an other' culture will open your mind. When you are open too such an experience you will develop yourself and have a really interesting and good time!

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