



Four producers, four views on replacement animals

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A panel discussion on rearing replacement animals was organized by Valacta and Holstein Québec as part of the Supreme Dairy Show held last November, in Saint-Hyacinthe. The four producers, introduced below, presented differing views on the subject. Here is what they had to say.

Our four panelists:

Amélie Tremblay owns Ferme Barjo, in the Charlevoix region, with her partner Dominique Bard. Their 75-head herd includes 38 milking cows and 32 heifers. Production is now at 12,555 kg of milk, with 4.1 per cent fat and 3.3 per cent protein. Replacement animals are selected through a rigorous process using the genetic tools available. Their goal is to rear just enough heifers to renew the herd without having to buy replacement animals.

Thierry Jatton and his partner Véronique Guay are joint owners of Ferme Provetaz, located in Compton, in the Eastern Townships. The 132 milking cows in their 290-head herd produce 11,100 kg of milk, with 4.0 per cent fat and 3.3 per cent protein. Mr. Jatton rears almost all of the heifers born on the farm. Every year, he sells about 40 milking

cows to other producers.

Raphaël Beauchemin is a third-generation owner of the family operation J. N. Beauchemin, in Saint-Ours, in the Montérégie region. The farm's 240 cows, housed in free stalls, produce 11,934 kg of milk (3 milkings/day), with 3.8 per cent fat and 3.2 per cent protein. Raphaël has diversified the operation with field crops and contract work and has a strong focus on herd management and heifer selection.

Caroline Martel is one of four shareholders of Ferme des Grandes Baies, in Plaisance, in the Outaouais region. She and her partner, Sylvain Mondou, are in the process of acquiring the farm from the Guindon family who wished to succeed the farm to non-family members. To ensure the viability of their project, the couple decided not to raise replacement animals, opting instead to purchase young cows on the basis of strict criteria. They are thus able to focus their attention on milk production, which currently exceeds 12,000 kg.

Q: How do you select your animals?

Caroline: We generally buy young cows in their first lacta-

tion, at about 30 days in milk. They have to have calved at 25 months or younger, and they must have conceived at first service, because it's a good indicator of future fertility. We do a CMT on all new cows as soon as they enter the herd. To keep their spot in the barn, our cows have to produce at least 1.2 kg of fat per day; otherwise they're out.

Thierry: We select our heifers at breeding time. They are either bred for their genetics or used as embryo recipients. Sire selection is based on LPI, and I only choose among those with the highest health and fertility indexes. For conformation, my criteria are at least +12 for proven bulls and +15 for genomic sires. We use a proportion of 70 per cent genomic bulls to 30 per cent proven. We've gone back to using sexed semen because there are better bulls available and fertility is improving.

Amélie: I select the dams at breeding time. As for sires, I rely on the insemination centre's program. My two main criteria are high productivity and fertility. I have all the heifers genotyped at birth.

Raphaël: We select our cows at breeding time, so about 20-30 per cent of them aren't bred, particularly those with a low Pro\$ index. We only use genomic sires, and we favour bulls

with good indexes for fertility, health and lifetime. Heifers are serviced with sexed semen, and we use a maximum of 10 sires per proof.

Q: Can you explain what sets you apart in your rearing costs?

Thierry: Our variable costs seem higher due to the genetic value of our calves, in addition to forage and reproduction costs. We have good equipment, which reduces our labour requirements.

Amélie: Our rearing costs are a little higher due to expenses for milk, concentrates and labour. Our focus on good feeding and management for our yearling heifers pays off because they calve young and produce well right from their first lactation.

Raphaël: Our housing costs are higher with our modern facilities. On the other hand, our workforce is more efficient and motivated because the environment is more pleasant.

Caroline: Buying for \$4,000 or rearing for \$3,500: it doesn't matter to me as long as I can get what I want when I want it. Since our arrival on the farm, we've replaced about 50 cows in the herd with animals we've bought, and the culling rate has dropped considerably as a result.

Q: Culling has a significant effect on the net cost of a new cow. Can you explain your situation?

Thierry: Our high sales/culling rate is strongly influenced by our sales of milking cows, and that income greatly reduces the net cost of a new cow in our herd.

Amélie: With the culling rate of our cows at about 20 per cent, the net cost of a new cow is near average of all dairy herds.

Raphaël: Our investments in heifer rearing result in lower costs. Our involuntary culling rate has decreased over the last two years, and we're now able to keep our cows in production longer.

Caroline: After acquiring shares in the farm, we intentionally culled the ordinary cows from the herd. Buying young cows has significantly reduced our culling rate. Both the culling rate and the net cost of a new cow should continue to decrease.

Q: Considering your goals, what makes your strategy successful?

Caroline: Biweekly preventive medicine visits and milk recording 12 times a year are essential. Despite the drop in the price of milk last summer, we haven't cut any of the services from our veterinarian or our Valacta advisor.

Thierry: We try to control everything without doing anything special. Calf care is important, and it's imperative to choose genetics that improve productivity.

Amélie: It's important to listen to one's advisors. Strict management and monitoring heifer growth are essential. We take very good care of our calves at birth, feeding colostrum as soon as possible. It's important not to put things off.

Raphaël: Only raise the best heifers and aim to raise them at the lowest cost possible. Our new buildings make us more efficient, because we're able to monitor feeding and growth more closely.

* This is a shortened version of an article that was originally published in the French Edition of *Progressive Dairymen Canada*, January 2017.



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