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0508 PD: Brown Swiss are often misunderstood, but offer milk unique for cheese processing

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Over the last 20 years the Brown Swiss breed has been stable in registration numbers and overall national herd size.

During this time, the breed has focused on improving production, particularly protein, addressing issues relating to raising calves, developing tests for genetic recessives and continuing to create lower somatic cell count milk.

Recently, the Brown Swiss Cattle Breeders Association of America (BSCBA) has also supported research efforts investigating the usage of Brown Swiss genetics for rotational crossbreeding.

Challenges

Currently, the BSCBA and the Brown Swiss breed face a number of challenges. Many of these challenges are directly related to being able to expand acceptance of profitable Brown Swiss genetics by commercial dairy producers. While the Brown Swiss cow has proven her durability in hot and cold climates by efficiently producing large quantities of high protein, low somatic cell milk, there remain a number of perceptions that are impediments to wider inclusion in the national dairy herd.

Some newborn Brown Swiss calves are not aggressive in taking the nipple, while some older calves do not drink out of a bucket. We refer to these animals as "smart calves" as they know the difference between their dams and other means of feeding. For Brown Swiss calves who exhibit these traits, there are management techniques that greatly reduce the misunderstanding and impact of this behavior. BSCBA needs to better educate commercial producers on management techniques for these calves.

The second major challenge is changing the belief that Brown Swiss heifers reach puberty at a later age than other breeds. This has been a self-inflicted wound by the Brown Swiss breed. For many years Brown Swiss breeders have, for a variety of reasons, made the choice to calve their heifers in at an older age. As a result, not only have producers outside the breed believed that the Brown Swiss is slower maturing, but the choice to delay breeding has also negatively impacted across-breed comparisons for Productive Life and Lifetime Net Merit.

Currently, a growing number of Brown Swiss breeders are showing that the Brown Swiss heifer can profitably calve in at 20 to 22 months. BSCBA needs to continue to encourage our own producers to calve in heifers at a younger, more profitable age, while improving industry awareness of the same.

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Opportunities

At the same time the Brown Swiss breed faces the above challenges, there are a number of opportunities to expand commercial acceptance.

The first is through inclusion of Brown Swiss semen in rotational crossbreeding. A research trial conducted by Dr. Chad Dechow of Pennsylvania State University and Dr. Gary Rogers of the University of Tennessee has produced significant results.

The trial has shown that while the F1 Brown Swiss x Holstein cross cows produce slightly less fluid milk (71 pounds vs. 73 pounds a day) than purebred Holsteins, the F1 exceed the same cows in total pounds of fat and protein produced (5.03 pounds vs. 4.85 pounds). This advantage increases as the cows mature. In the third lactation the F1 cross outproduces the Holstein by 0.6 pounds of combined fat and protein a day. The F1 cross is also significantly lower in somatic cell count than either Holstein or Brown Swiss, further increasing the value of the milk.

A second opportunity that BSCBA has is aggressively taking part in the Bovine Genome Project. The fruits of these projects will allow the Brown Swiss breeder to improve bull mother selection along with young sire selection; a combination that will significantly increase the rate of genetic improvement of the breed. This, combined with sexed semen, will allow BSCBA to provide superior genetics both for crossbreeding and for straight Brown Swiss herds.

A third major opportunity is to be found in the research and development of premium cheese, butter and other manufactured dairy products from purebred Brown Swiss milk.

Studies conducted at South Dakota State University and the University of California – Davis have shown that Brown Swiss milk has characteristics that are unique from other breeds. Primary of these are the differences in the ratio of long- to short-chain fatty acids. Combined with ideal protein-to-fat ratios and lower somatic cell, BSCBA sees the opportunity to provide the consumer of manufactured dairy products a superior product that will in turn increase the demand for the Brown Swiss cow.

The Brown Swiss cow continues to offer lower somatic cell counts and much more to improve the bottom line of the commercial dairy producer. **PD**

—Submitted by the Brown Swiss Cattle Breeders Association of America

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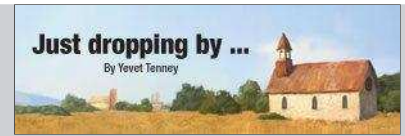
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