The Welfare of Male Calves in Welsh Organic Dairy Herds

Philip Jones
BOBL Project Field Officer

January 2011
Acknowledgements

Better Organic Business Links – Gwell Cysylltiadau Busnes Organig

The Better Organic Business Links (BOBL) project, run by Organic Centre Wales, is a four year project designed to support the primary producer in Wales and grow the market for Welsh organic produce in a sustainable way.

The aim is to develop markets for organic produce whilst driving innovation and promoting sustainable behaviours at all levels within the supply chain, to increase consumer demand and thence markets for organic produce, especially in the home market, and to ensure that the primary producers are aware of market demands. The project provides valuable market information to primary producers and the organic sector in general.

Delivery of the project is divided into five main areas of work:

- Fostering innovation and improving supply chain linkages
- Consumer information and image development of organic food and farming in Wales
- Market development
- Providing market intelligence to improve the industry's level of understanding of market trends and means of influencing consumer behaviour
- Addressing key structural problems within the sector.

In all elements of the work, the team are focused on building capacity within the organic sector, to ensure that the project leaves a legacy of processors and primary producers with improved business and environmental skills, able to respond to changing market conditions, consumer demands and climate change.

The project is funded under the Rural Development Plan for Wales 2007-2013, in turn funded by the Welsh Government and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

For further information on the project please see:

Better Organic Business Links - Organic Centre Wales | Canolfan Organig Cymru

Or contact The BOBL Project, c/o Organic Centre Wales. Phone 01970 622248
# Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... 2  
1  Introduction ................................................................................................................. 4  
2  Background .................................................................................................................. 4  
3  Scale of the challenge in the UK and Wales. ............................................................... 4  
4  The position of Organic Control Bodies (OCB) and Milk Processors.................. 5  
5  Parallels with Poultry .................................................................................................... 5  
6  Calf rearing case studies .............................................................................................. 6  
   6.1  Helen Browning of Eastbrook farm, Swindon ....................................................... 6  
   6.2  Andy King of Coombe Farms .............................................................................. 6  
7  Approaches to the challenge ....................................................................................... 7  
   7.1  Breed Selection ..................................................................................................... 7  
   7.2  Selective Reproduction ....................................................................................... 7  
   7.3  Calf Rearing ........................................................................................................ 7  
   7.4  Selling unwanted calves ..................................................................................... 8  
   7.5  Marketing calves from traditional breeds ........................................................... 8  
8  Conclusions .................................................................................................................. 9
1 Introduction

The humane slaughter of unwanted bull calves has become a common practice on UK dairy farms, both conventional and organic. The Organic Milk Cooperative (OMSCo) estimates that there are approximately 31,000 unwanted organic calves born each year, which are shot on farm. Culling unwanted male dairy calves used to be an occasional act and more or less confined to the Channel Island breeds only, but as the North American Holstein cow has become more popular from the 1980’s onward, the practice of humanely slaughtering male calves has increased.

Consumers of organic food expect the treatment of livestock on organic farms to be based on higher ethical values than merely economics; therefore, the organic dairy industry must find ways other than humane culling of dealing with the issue of unwanted male calves. Neither is it within the ethos of organic farming to dispose of an animal because it has no economic value. The purpose of this report is to assess the implications of this for Welsh dairy farmers, outline the options for farmers needing to address this issue, and identify ways in which Organic Centre Wales (OCW) and other organisations can assist them to do so.

2 Background

As agriculture has become more specialised, dairy cows have been bred to produce milk not meat, resulting in an animal that has a large, lean carcase which houses a big rumen and digestive system. The male offspring of this type of cow consequently develop similar body conformation which means that they are of limited value as meat producing animals. Even if it were economically viable to rear these calves (conventionally, these animals have previously been reared as entire males on the barley beef system and sold at 16 months old with the meat usually entering the food chain in processed form) the conformation classification system used to grade carcases would penalise the dairy beef animal because it fell outside the most marketable carcase specification. (http://www.foodassurance.teagasc.ie/NR/rdonlyres/0279BFE9-BCD5-49C5-A365-EF7F6B95FA96/60/CarcaseClassification.pdf).

In these days of greater concern about resource depletion and animal welfare, it doesn’t seem ethical for the organic movement to be carrying out this practice. The issues came to prominence after Helen Browning, then Policy Adviser to the Soil Association (SA), was asked by Sky News reporter whether shooting calves at birth was in accordance with the organic ethos. Shortly afterwards Soil Association Certification (SA Cert)\(^1\) announced it would require their licensees to phase out the practice by 2015.

3 Scale of the challenge in the UK and Wales.

Peter Savidge of OMSCo, at a SA organised event held at Winsham, Somerset in January 2010, shared the results of a survey of their producers that showed there were potentially 31,000 unwanted calves (in the UK) and that the issue needed addressing. Organic dairy cooperatives are very aware that publicity about shooting unwanted calves would be very damaging to the sales of organic milk and are willing to discuss methods whereby this practice can be stopped.

\(^{1}\) SA Cert is an organic certification body, and is a separate organisation from the Soil Association.
The SA also referred to other surveys that have been undertaken but there is no data specific to Wales. Because information on the number of calves disposed of in Wales is scant, BOBL created a questionnaire and Farming Connect Field Officers together with Welsh DairyCo Representatives requested dairy farmers that came to various discussion group meetings and events to complete the form. Thirteen forms were completed and returned, with some farmers unwilling to share information on their calf rearing policies. Of the 13 completed questionnaires ten farmers do not cull calves at birth, one farmer does so occasionally and the remaining two do so regularly. One of the farmers who does humanely dispose of calves has a Channel Island breed of dairy cow and even the SA make exceptions to the no shooting policy with this breed because the males can never be reared on to produce a worthwhile carcase.

Thirteen returned questionnaires account for 10% of the 136 Welsh organic dairy producers recorded on the OCW Database. Discussion with certifying bodies representing around 500 members, support the claim that it is not a common practice within Welsh organic dairying.

The author concludes that the Better Organic Business Links (BOBL) project does not need to allocate resources to the issue of unwanted male dairy calves; however, raising the profile of the options for management of the animals would be beneficial.

4 The position of Organic Control Bodies (OCB) and Milk Processors

EU and IFOAM Standards make no reference to the disposal of calves, and only refer to slaughter in the context of finished/fattened animals. However, different OCBs in Wales take different stances on the issue.

As discussed above, all SA Cert dairy licensees must produce a plan, with timescales, showing how they will develop an alternative management plan to the culling of calves where this is the current policy on the farm. Calon Wen, an important milk processor in Wales also prohibits their suppliers from disposing of calves, regardless of which control body they are licensed with.

OMSCo, who are the largest UK buyer of organic milk are in discussion with their producers over the issue of the humane disposal of male calves and collectively are investigating alternative ways of developing alternative management plans. OMSCo would like to see an end to this practise by 2015.

Quality Welsh Food Certification Ltd: QWFC Ltd has not banned the practice either but has advised its 24 dairy producer licensees to review the practice. Eight of these supply Calon Wen and therefore do not dispose of calves. Fourteen are suppliers of OMSCo who are taking separate action on the issue.

5 Parallels with Poultry

The disposal of unwanted males is not unique to the dairy sector, either conventional or organic, because it also happens in the poultry industry and for similar reasons.

The Humane Slaughter Association in their Factsheet 14 state ‘The development of the poultry industry has led to birds being genetically selected for different purposes, either egg or meat production. Laying hens are bred to produce as many eggs as possible, with a minimum amount of weight gain. Only females can be used in the laying industry and it is not economically viable to keep the males of laying strains for meat production. As a result, over 40 million day old chicks are killed each year in hatcheries because they are males unwanted for the production of eggs or because they are sickly or deformed’. 
Parallels can be drawn between the males produced by laying hens and Holstein cows; both are unsuited for meat production because genetically their specialised purpose is to produce eggs or milk without putting on surplus flesh.

The organic poultry sector too has to defend its production methods, although disposing of male chicks is possibly less emotive than the killing of unwanted male dairy calves and there might be less of a risk that consumers of organic poultry products will cease buying organic eggs and table birds. A senior figure in one of Wales’ organic certification bodies has stated that even organic food which is produced to the highest of standards has aspects of its production methods that might sit uncomfortably with consumers if they were to know of them.

6 Calf rearing case studies

There are examples of producers who are already managing their organic farms over and above the old standards, and in doing so abiding by the principles and spirit of organic farming, not just the standards.

6.1 Helen Browning of Eastbrook farm, Swindon

Helen Browning, Chief Executive of the SA, farms 1300 acres at Eastbrook near Shrivenham, Swindon. When she first took over the farm she tried extreme Holstein genetics but now is breeding pure British Friesian, and over the last 15 years has been rearing all of the calves from the 180 strong dairy herd. Initially the farm bought in powdered milk but later decided it did not make sense to milk a cow, send the milk to a processor who would dry it and sell it back to the farm to add water to it so that it could be fed to calves.

Five years ago, a purpose built shed was erected at a cost of £125,000 and this is the hub of the calf rearing enterprise. All cows that need time to rest from the rigours of the daily dairy routine are allocated to calf rearing and each cow rears approximately six calves per annum with about 40 cows on calf rearing duties at any one time. About 180 calves are reared per annum using this system. Cows and calves are allowed to bond in small groups and then brought together into small herds when a bull would be included. Veal calves are kept with the cows for the whole of the 8 month period and it is the poorer conformation calves that are marketed earliest. No calves are castrated and those animals not sold as veal at 8 months are kept on until 16 months, with cows to provide company and stability and encourage docility.

All of the calves are reared to organic standard, are out at grass whenever possible and fed concentrate up to the permitted amount. Most of the diet is high quality forage, such as red clover silage with pea and oat mix as concentrate. Helen says that marketing the meat is a greater problem than rearing the animals. The enterprise does show a profit but only just.

6.2 Andy King of Coombe Farms


Coombe Farm processes milk for Waitrose who require that the production methods behind the processed milk sold in their stores complies with the whole organic ethos. This processor has developed a system of rearing calves to beef weight that might otherwise have been shot. Coombe Farm produces about 600 animals per annum and sells them to Waitrose via Dovecote Park.

Their system depends upon an automated milk dispenser manufactured by Volac to dispense milk in quantities of about 1 litre per feed. Calves have collars with transponders
fitted and the system rations the amount of milk that a calf receives, up to a maximum amount of 6 litres a day. Coombe Farm has a large milk processing plant which supplies Waitrose with organic milk and the milk fed to calves is a by-product of the cleaning process. The Volac machine can be programmed to add a little powdered milk to the washings milk, so that the calf receives a feed that is more or less the same constitution as a cow’s whole milk.

This system is a large scale approach to the problem of rearing unwanted calves and buys in calves which are between 14 and 30 days old from those farmers that are supplying Coombe Farm with milk. Many farmers would describe themselves as milk producers not beef farmers and prefer to sell their unwanted calves to this enterprise. Rearing the calves after weaning at 12 weeks is done using clean grazing, good quality silage and a coarse mix when and where necessary. Some of the cattle are sold on to finishers and other animals are ‘rented out’ to stockless arable/horticulture units. Dovecote Park/Waitrose don’t penalise carcases from dairy cross calves, hence the enterprise being able to show a modest profit.

7 Approaches to the challenge

7.1 Breed Selection

The choice of breed has to be balanced against another objective of organic farming, namely maximising production from forage. For the dairy producer who is committed to milking Channel Island breeds the options are limited, as these breeds are not suited to finishing for beef. However, farmers that produce milk from the black and white breeds can choose to move away from the extreme Holstein that can produce upwards of 10,000 litres of milk/annum or the hybrid Jersey/Friesian cow, the breed of choice for the extended-grazing/maximising-milk-from-forage farm. Instead they could consider introducing traditional British Friesian genetics; the breed of cow that was the mainstay of the UK dairy industry for decades.

The British Friesian, although not as prolific a milker as the Holstein, makes up for the financial shortfall from milk sales by producing a saleable bull calf and has greater value as a barren cow. By breeding for longevity, the requirement for replacements can be reduced and more use made of beef bulls. Currently, 50% or more of the UK national dairy herd are bred pure to ensure that there are enough heifers reared as replacements, but fewer cows would need to be bred pure if the average number of lactations achieved by the dairy cow were to increase from the current 3.6.

7.2 Selective Reproduction

Most dairy herds rely on artificial insemination (AI) for reproduction and technology has also made it possible to sex semen. Farmers can choose to select sexed semen from a limited number of bulls and although cows that are served with sexed semen don’t inevitably produce heifer calves, there is a reduction in the number of bull calves born. For farmers that keep Channel Island breeds, this is a technology that potentially could be of benefit to them. Organic Standards permit the use of sexed semen when the separation process is done physically and not chemically.

7.3 Calf Rearing

It might seem an obvious option but there are many legitimate reasons why in many cases, it is not practicable to rear all calves.

Specialisation – the scale of dairying has changed significantly over the last 10 – 15 years; the average size of dairy herds has increased from 70 cows to 150 and there are
some Welsh organic dairy herds with more than 500 cows. Many dairy farms simply don’t have the labour or the buildings to rear male calves. Unwanted livestock has to be disposed of quickly and at times when bull calves have very little value, tagging and registering them alone is costly and time consuming.

TB – this zoonosis disease is a major problem that many farmers have to contend with; a TB breakdown (when an animal has failed a TB test and the farm has livestock movement restrictions placed upon it) can create unbearable burdens on a dairy farm’s resources that are already overstretched. Livestock movement restrictions can be in place for many months and sometimes even years; rearing unwanted calves and having to keep them until they reach slaughter weight is physically not possible.

Cost – Many producers would rear calves if their costs were covered. OMSCo estimates that it costs in the region of £400 to rear a calf to 3 months old in accordance with organic standards (feeding rearing calves on organic milk concentrate, bedded on straw etc), and the cost would be considerably more by the time it had reached slaughter weight at 18 – 24 months of age. In the light of this, it is often not a cost effective option, especially if the dairy beef enterprise displaces either the dairy herd or grazing reserved for the dairy replacements.

7.4 Selling unwanted calves

There has always been trading of calves from the dairy herd but prices are variable. When the number of Holstein dairy cows in the UK increased from the late 1980s onwards, the market for dairy bull calves weakened because rearing the Holstein males resulted in a carcase of poor conformation. To a lesser extent, the crossbred female calf trade also weakened, as suckler cow enterprises (the main purchasers of crossbred females) saw these calves develop into cows that were too dairy type in appearance and that were less robust. It was only the European veal market that could utilise the extreme dairy type calf, but when TB was diagnosed in UK imported calves from the UK to a Continental veal unit in 2008, the export market stopped and dairy calf values plummeted.

The Soil Association organic standards do not permit new calves from organic dairy herds to be sold in markets as they may end up in European veal crates. Their standards require that calves must not be sold under the age of 30 days, by which time they are too old for the veal crate system. However, because there is no longer an export market for UK calves the point is academic, at least for the foreseeable future. Possibly, this standard needs to be reviewed in the light of the cessation of calf exports and the age at which it is permitted to sell a calf could be reduced from 30 to 14 days. If it were permitted to sell a calf after 14 days, it is less likely that organic dairy farmers would euthanize calves but rather, rear them on for the reduced retention period.

7.5 Marketing calves from traditional breeds

Organic dairy farmers that have dual purpose type cows, find a ready market for their calves. Elfyn Davies of Glancynnin, St Clears, Carmarthen, manufacturer of Sanclôr Yoghurt Cheese, manages a herd of Meuse Rhine Issel (MRI) cattle and has customers, conventional and organic, keen to buy his calves and prepared to pay a premium price that makes it worthwhile for him to keep the calves for the 30 day period.
8 Conclusion

If the humane disposal practice is to end then rearing male dairy calves will have to be workable, manageable and profitable. In Section 6 examples are given of how one dairy farmer and one milk processor have devised ways of achieving this. The answer for the industry as a whole is unlikely to lie in one course of action alone, but through a combination of the approaches listed in Section 7. In dealing with the issue organic farming is leading the way in forcing the food supply chain to confront important ethical and moral challenges. Challenges which also need to be addressed by the conventional supply chain.