

Should I raise my heifers?

The answer depends upon your management and ability to raise quality heifers.

By Jason Karszes

There isn't a universal answer to whether a dairy should raise its heifers. But there is a process you can work through to arrive at an answer for your dairy. Begin the process by answering the questions here. Then take the step indicated by your answer.

1. Are you raising a high quality heifer?

- Yes - go to 2
 No - go to 3

A quality heifer carries no limitations - poor feet and legs, mastitis, and high body condition score - into the dairy herd that would hinder its ability to produce under a dairy's management system.

2. Are your costs to raise heifers competitive?

- Yes - keep raising heifers
 No - go to 7

Multiple studies show that the costs to raise dairy replacements range from \$1,200 to \$1,500 when animals enter the dairy herd. How do your costs compare to these?

The costs to raise high quality animals can't be so high that they offset the profits to be gained by the replacement or be unusually higher than other producers' costs.

3. Can you acquire the resources to raise a quality heifer?

- Yes - go to 4
 No - go to 7

Based on your analysis, what areas can you improve to raise quality heifers?

Resources that impact a heifer program include management, capital, labor, feed, health care, bio-security and facilities. To change or improve a business area generally requires additional money, management and other resources. Can your dairy acquire these resources? If you commit additional resources to the heifer raising enterprise, target them at areas where you'll get the greatest return.

4. Will you realize the greatest improvement in profit by investing in the heifer enterprise or investing in other areas?

- Yes - go to 5
 No - go to 7

Before you make a decision to invest re-

sources in the dairy replacement enterprise, analyze your overall business needs.

5. If you commit additional resources to the dairy replacement enterprise, will your costs be competitive with the costs of other options to acquire dairy replacements?

- Yes - go to 6
 No - go to 7

If you make a change in the heifer enterprise, how does it affect your cost of raising replacements and dairy profitability?

6. Make the additional investment to your heifer enterprise and keep raising replacements. Continually analyze your replacement program to ensure that it's generating a return that more than covers additional resources committed.

You've completed the process with your decision to continue raising heifers.

7. Is there a viable option to either custom board your heifers or purchase them and, at the same time, maintain or improve heifer quality?

- Yes - go to 8
 No - go to 10

Before you decide to out-source heifers, identify viable heifers growers or service providers. Are they raising heifers equal, if not better, in quality than what you do?

8. Is the cost to obtain custom raising services or purchasing animals comparable to your heifer enterprise costs? Or is the quality of the animal high enough that profits will offset the cost?

- Yes - go to 9
 No - go to 10

9. Look at either boarding out or buying all your replacements as a way to increase your business profits.

10. If there are no viable options to have your heifers custom raised or to buy them, improvement will come only through changing your current system.

You've completed the process with this decision. Return to questions 2 and 3 and look at what areas offer the greatest opportunity to improve your replacement enterprise.

Well-managed dairies repeat this process regularly to access the quality of their heifer program and what they should do to improve it. ■



To begin making a decision on whether you should raise your own heifers ask yourself: Am I raising a quality heifer? Photo by Eleanor Jacobs.

FYI

■ Jason Karszes is a farm management specialist with the PRO-DAIRY program at Cornell University.

■ For more information on the cost to raise heifers, see this website: www.ansci.cornell.edu/prodairy. Click on farm management, then articles. Locate Dairy Replacement Programs, Cost and Analysis Western New York, 1993.

■ The Penn State Dairy Team website has an Excel spreadsheet to calculate heifer costs. See www.das.psu.edu/teamdairy. Download Cost to Raise Replacement Heifers.

■ The Professional Dairy Heifer Growers Association sponsors conferences on heifer production. Contact it at 111 Dunlap Ave., Savoy, IL 61874. Phone: (800) 434-337.