

Workshop Title:

Small Cows, Small Acreages, Big Profits

Speakers:

Mike Lafortune, Owner/Operator Dexter Cattle Company

Executive Summary:

Mike Lafortune talked about his experiences raising Irish Dexter cattle. He outlines the advantages of this dual-purpose breed for production on small acreages. He also touched on reasons why this breed works well in organic systems, average yields of beef he has experienced on his farm, and the ease of handling offered by this docile breed.

Main Notes:

Irish Dexter Cattle Description.

Dual-purpose cows

Small breed, very docile

Black, horned, black, brown

Does not need any grain for beef production.

Robust immune system. No need for vaccines, etc.

Tri-purpose. Also used as oxen.

Can gather and handle 60 cows easily with two people. Very easy to handle.

Milk: 1-3 gallons / day. 1-5% butterfat content.

Farm Description

3-sided sheds. 45-acre property

Other property 40 acres

Why go Organic—4 whys:

Sustainability: 2.5 Dexters to 1 conventional cow. Heritage breed. Breed is roughly in the original form (1800s). Purebred.

Animal Dignity: Treat animals with a tiny bit more respect

Healthy Meat: High nutrient content and a high percentage of quality fats.

Economic viability: Lower costs. No grains, fertilizer, antibiotics, vet bills.

Has a 1000lb, alpha-male. Keeps the herd safe.

Yield of meat from cows.

750-800 lbs. animal when mature. 450 lbs. meat. 65-70% when all cut.

600lbs. 284 lbs. hanging. 90% of that weight went into the freezer.

High nutrient content, high % quality fats, lowest toxin ratings, low environmental impact.

Organic beef. There is limited challenge in finding consumers. The challenge is scaling up the herd.

Cows will have their first calf at 2 years old. Will continue calving Until 15 or 16 years old. 60 days prior calving the cow will kick off any calf she is currently nursing. Cows will live into the 20s.

Mike spends winter deciding which cows to breed with each other.

3 males, essentially 3 herds. They make sure there is no inbreeding.

Winter handling

100% hay fed in the winter.

Bedding. Lean-to. Rubber mat. Straw mat.

Water. In loafing shed. Automatic filling and heating.

Feels the market is wide open for producers.

Ideal cattle for small acreages.

Historically they were the 'poor man's cow'. Very easy to manage with little equipment and acreage.

Breed was on the endangered list. Industrialization led to larger breeds for increased meat production to feed urban populations.

Challenge would be in finding this breed. There are not many around anymore.

This breed is a great introduction to the livestock business.

[Questions]

All dexters are checked to guard against inbred qualities. PHA and short legs are common in this breed.

Need to be checked in order to get them registered with organization.

There is semen available for this breed.

Opportunity to catch the cow at the right time is tricky.

Having the bull fertilize is preferred in his opinion.

Fencing. 3 strand electro brand (grade).

Especially on high traffic border.

Has used single strand on other fields.

Cows are very easy to train about electric fence. Docile breed.

Pasture rotation method. Kept in place with a low electric wire (single).

Calving % and ability is great. They have had no issues with this.

Mothering skill is excellent. Quickly get nursing. Protective instincts on the mother's part.

Rough graze. Historically have been known to eat just about anything.

Great in pasture with trees.

Need to make sure that nutrition is sufficient.

Castrate. De-Horn. Does not do any of this. Instead has the bulls separated in their own herd. They are then mixed with suitable cows when it's time to breed.

Has not experienced in fighting in bulls. Youngers bulls are quickly taught a lesson by larger older bulls. Teaches them respect. Keep an older bull with the younger ones.

Profitability. Inputs are much less than other breeds. Especially organic supplements.

Gets \$8.00 / lb. for meat.

Very tender and flavourful. Lean.

Inputs. Some minerals are the only things aside from hay.

Has thought about selling milk but quota is a barrier and so they keep dairy as a hobby for personal consumption.

Currently growing the herd. Not selling any cows outside of farm.

\$2.50 for .5 gallon is the production cost for milk production.

Grass mixtures for hay. 1st round, 100% timothy hay. 80-20 grass-alfalfa. Harvesting alfalfa is tricky in PEI because of rainfall.

Uses no-till seeder.

Timothy, white clover, brome grass. Are doing experiments in different pastures on farm.

No experience with double cut red clover.

Has had trouble getting cows to eat seaweed meal. It's a mixture of kelp/seaweed mix.

Silage. Is there a reason you stay away from it?

No experience with so far. Cow can get sick off silage. If the vet needs to intervene, there is a good chance the cow cannot be sold as organic if shots are needed.

Not worth the risk.

Wintering ability. 3-sided shed. Can go in and out as they choose.

Compensatory gain. Even if they lose weight over winter, they pick it up very quickly in the spring.

22 to 26 months is when they are ideally slaughtered. Have experimented with 18 month but found them to be too small.

Vacuum-pack meat and freeze. Is good up to 1 year with no deterioration.

White fat. Dark red meat.

Experience with predator problems. Has found llamas to be extremely effective. Also, guardian dog had been very effective.

Have had no trouble in PEI herd. They work very well as a herd and use their horns very well to protect each other.