

Making the switch away from dairy

Invest or get out. That is the decision dairy farmers are facing on a daily basis. **Sarah Trickett** caught up with one family who made the move out of dairying

Unpredictable milk prices, insufficient labour, NVZ regulations and the need to invest – they are issues probably ringing true with many dairy farmers at present – but what are the options for those wishing to get out?

For father and son team Mervin and Matthew Keeling, Wilmington, Somerset, the decision to get out of dairy farming in 2007 had been on the cards for several years before finally selling up, explains Mervin.

“There were several reasons that drove us out; we weren’t happy with the milk price, we had trouble sourcing reliable labour and we could see a large investment coming in the way of a new parlour and the need for cubicles. Plus, with NVZ regulation on the horizon, we just weren’t committed enough to invest such money,” he says.

And on a steep valley farm in the heart of Somerset, the Keelings knew they had to have livestock on the farm to graze the valley, which is why they took the decision to finish dairy beef calves on the Blade Farming Angus scheme. But finishing Angus cross dairy calves was the last thing Mervin thought he and his son would end up doing.

“Angus were the last thing on my mind. I always assumed Continental crosses would be the way forward as we had always reared about 60-80 Continental crosses a year from the dairy herd and achieved good prices. But when Blade Farming approached us it seemed like an easy option and seemed to fit in,” Mervin explains.

The abundance of forage at Wilmington Farm means the Angus crosses are well suited to the system, adds Matthew. “We grow maize, barley and wheat and also have young leys for silage and grazing. Because the Angus crosses are suited to more forage-based systems, they fit in well with our farm



Mervin and Matthew Keeling decided to finish dairy beef calves on the Blade Farming Angus scheme.

because we feed a 90% forage-based diet.”

Calves are purchased in batches of about 70 throughout the year and upon arrival are split in to two groups of 30 and a group of 10. “Calves are grouped according to size and this helps reduce stress and maximise development.”

But the switch from milking cows to finishing beef calves wasn’t an expensive one, adds Mervin. “It cost us about £2000 to change and that was to turn part of the silage pit into additional housing for the calves. We were lucky though because when milking cows they were loose housed, so we didn’t have to



The Angus crosses are suited to more forage-based systems, which fits well with the abundance of forage at Wilmington Farm.

rip out cubicles or install additional buildings.”

The flow of cash was also maintained following the dispersal of the Keelings’ 150 cows in January 2007, adds Mervin. “In the last 12 months before the cows went we reared 100 Continental calves from the dairy herd, to keep the cash flow going.”

But, even though cows have been gone for more than three years, the mindset of a dairy farmer still remains and has proved vital when finishing cattle as effectively and efficiently as possible.

“Our attitude towards forage production hasn’t changed; getting the best forage possible is just as important when finishing calves as it is when milking cows,” says Mervin. “Better quality forage, which we get analysed, means less bought-in

concentrate; it’s worth investing the time establishing quality leys.”

On the predominately forage-based diet the Angus crosses are growing at about 1kg a day with heifers killing out at 320-380kg DW, whereas the steers will be killed at 340-350kg DW at 22-24 months old. However, the Keelings have just taken the decision to buy all steers from Blade instead of heifers, so they can get to a heavier weight quicker.

But whether it’s heifers or steers the Keelings are finishing, it is proving to be a profitable enterprise and the savings made rearing calves has been substantial, comments Matthew. “Financially we are not writing out the cheques anymore. We have no AI costs, parlour maintenance or herdsman costs and we have also cut the cost of electricity, water and vet costs – the bills have just vanished.”

And being in a Blade contract provides some security for their future, adds Mervin. “We feel future proofed because we are always guaranteed a base price of £2.80/kg, which gives us a minimum price to work too.”

And in line with other Blade Angus finishers the Keeling’s are producing a gross margin of about £150 a calf. “This gives us the confidence to invest. For example, we are looking at investing in slurry storage solutions to comply with NVZ requirements, although we are only producing about a quarter of the amount of muck we used to.”

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