

A comparative study would begin to settle debate over Hereford genetics

By John Shirley, Irish Independent

At the recent beef open day at Teagasc Grange, Hereford breeder Val Ledwith got stuck into the Teagasc speakers about the lack of Hereford genetics on the research unit.

"You talk about exploiting grass, yet you do not use the genetics that are best suited to grass. How can you ignore a beef breed that is dominant across the world and is tops for eating quality?" asked Mr Ledwith.

As a practised fence-sitter I can see both sides of the story.

Eddie O Riordan, head of Grange, explained to the open day visitors that the breed types in the new 120-cow Derrypatrick herd at Grange represented more than 70pc of the cattle on commercial farms.

Hereford breeders argue that, when all factors are taken on board, their cattle will return the best net profit. They point to lower maintenance costs, less mortality and a shorter calving interval. In recent years these benefits have been augmented by a price premium for certified Hereford beef.

Shortly after the Grange event, the Irish Hereford Society organised their own open day. This was held on the suckler farm of brothers Keith and

Trevor Meredith in Ballylinan, Co Laois. The Merediths switched from dairy/sucklers to all sucklers. Labour and machinery are shared but each brother has his own herd, farmyard, wife and family.

Initially they ran a Limousin bull but then switched to Hereford bulls on the mainly Limousin-cross cows, plus a Simmental bull to breed replacements. The switch to Herefords was made for easier fleshing off grass and for quieter cattle.

The Meredith herds are calved to grass in March. Heifers are finished at 20-22 months and the bullocks at 24-27 months, mostly off grass. This season, because of grass shortage, 14 bullocks were sold in the mart. The Merediths have linked up with the Hereford Prime Scheme, which pays a 10c/kg bonus for carcasses that grade E, U, R and O for conformation and that grade 3 or 4 for fat.

Now in their third season with Herefords, results have been on expected lines. In particular, the two herds have a tight calving pattern with 120 cows calving over the months of March and April, and losses at "little or none". Another Hereford bull was bought for this spring.

At a special breed event, the organisers will naturally promote the positives. But the Herefords have a decent well of independent measurement coming from the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF), which backs up their claims.

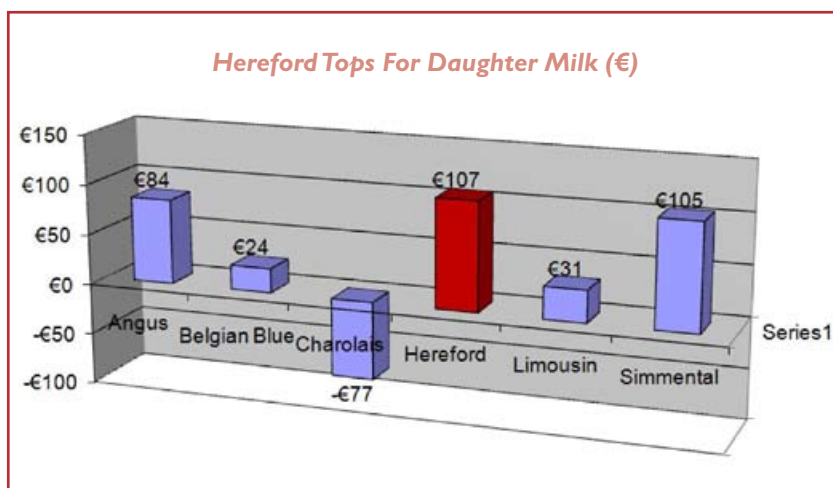
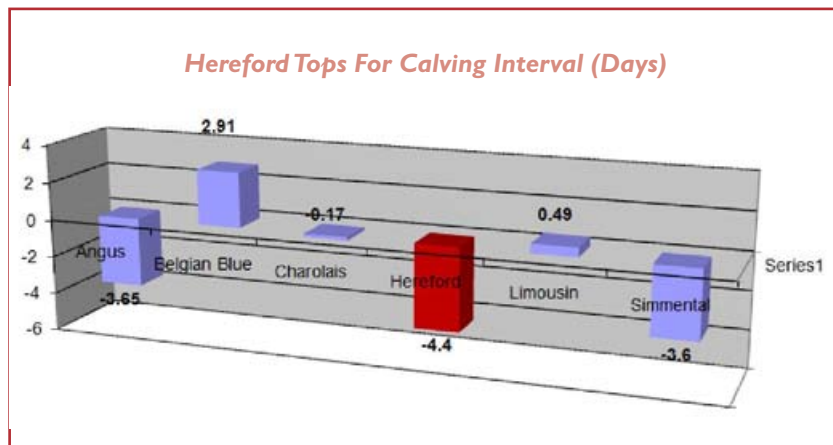
When it comes to ICBF indexes and values for milk and fertility, calving interval, calving traits and daughter milk, the Hereford is leading the field. The table (below) gives the updated ICBF figures. It shows the Hereford shortening the calving interval by 4.4 days. In the same vein the Hereford ranks as the top beef breed for milk fertility and daughter milk.

When it comes to growth rates, recent Hereford and Angus bulls coming out of the Tully Test Station were up there with the best continental animals.

Yet on the ground, numbers of Hereford cattle have dwindled from the peaks of the 1960s and 1970s when they dominated beef breeding in Ireland and even entered milking parlours as well. I remember a headline: "Cavan's number 1 enemy -- The Hereford Cross Cow". The author was railing against the Cavan farmer practice of bringing Hereford-cross Friesians into the dairy herd.

When it comes to breed promotion the bottom line is that this must be led by the farmer breeders themselves. Teagasc, Bord Bia and meat plants will not lead such a campaign. They may help, and even piggy back, on an existing campaign but they will not take the initiative.

Against this background, Hereford breeders and the Irish Hereford Society set up the Hereford Prime scheme in the Republic and Certified



Choose Hereford For Claving Traits (€)



Against the background of the positive ICBF indexes I can see why Val Ledwith and fellow breeders would like to have seen a dozen or so Hereford cross cows included in the new 120-cow suckler herd at Grange.

Maybe a better way for the Hereford and Angus cattle to show their paces would involve setting up a unit dedicated to the breed and comparing this to another unit with a typical continental cross herd. This would reveal which genotype left the best bottom line profit.

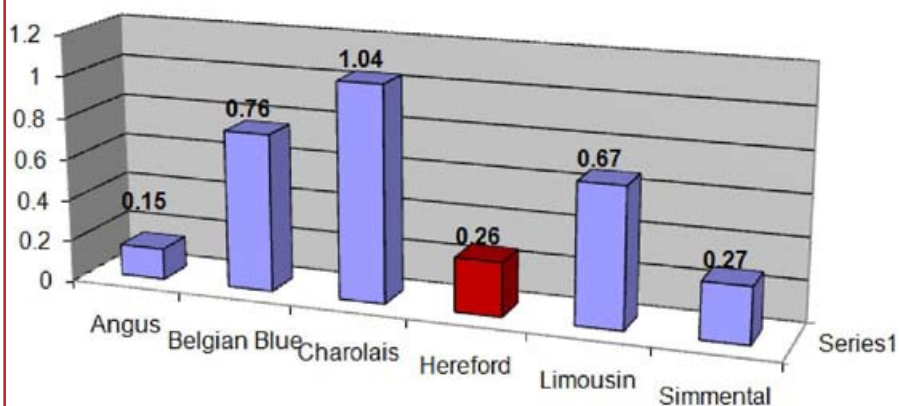
Hereford Scheme in the North. This bonus-led scheme is aimed at the domestic and export quality restaurant market.

"Over the past 14 years we have invested €150,000 in developing the Certified Hereford brand, which is now taking 320 cattle a week," said Hereford Society secretary Laurence Feeny.

Trojan work and a lot of foot slogging by breeders, such as the late Robert Deverell, was needed to get the brand off the ground.

The demand for the Hereford Prime has continued to grow despite the recession. The scheme has given Hereford breeders confidence in their product.

Hereford For Low Mortality (%)



Hereford Tops For Milk & Fertility (€)

