

Why Holstein Heifers?

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Why Holstein heifers? This actually relates to an advanced grazing topic. One of the challenges as you raise more grass is figuring how to "market" it. We are looking for ways to expand our operation, but we don't want to milk more cattle.

On April 24th, 1998, we purchased 21 Holstein heifers through the Manchester sale barn. All were calfhood vaccinated and had been checked to be breeders. Seventeen of these heifers weighed 800 lbs, and four weighed 500 lbs. The plan was to expose the 17 bigger heifers immediately and sell them as bred heifers in the fall. We hoped to grow the 500-lb heifers and sell them as breeding age heifers in the fall.

Pertinent questions and our answers -

1) Why Holstein heifers? Our expertise is with Holsteins. We know the market, we know how they perform in our pasture program, we owned a Holstein bull to breed them to, and we could keep any heifer that doesn't remain salable and use her in our dairy.

2) Why 500-lb and 800-lb heifers? We have not had good luck putting heifers less than 500 lbs on pasture. We have had marginal success with 500-lb heifers and very good growth with our bred and breeding age heifers. We decided to try a few smaller heifers for future reference, as it is not always easy to find a group of exactly the size one might want. We insisted on 800-lb heifers that we could breed immediately for two reasons. First, it takes an 800-lb heifer at breeding to make a springing heifer that is big enough to bring top dollar on the market, especially if demand is soft. Secondly, the best market for selling heifers is about 1½ to 2 months before they calve. These heifers do not yet have an udder (which can be injured in cross-country transportation). We wanted all our purchased heifers gone before January.

3) What expenses did we incur?

Transportation \$7.00/hd.
 Veterinary \$5.00/hd.
 Mineral \$10.00/hd.

The bull and the grass were fixed costs - they would have been incurred whether we had these cattle or not. This is one of the catches to grass farming; once the land has been committed to a grass-clover pasture, mechanical harvest is not a very profitable alternative compared to grazing.

4) Death losses? We figured 5% (which is historical for our operation), and we lost one out of 21.

5) How did we obtain and sell our stock? We purchased these heifers ourselves through a reputable sale barn. This saved us 5-8 cents per pound. This is what Gordon Hazard calls "purchased profit." (Anyone interested in harvesting grass through feeder livestock needs to read Pasture Profits with Stocker Cattle, available through Stockman Grass Farmer.) Demand was very strong this fall, so we sold these cattle through a sale barn. If demand had been softer, we would probably have tried to sell through an order buyer.

We purchased 15,600 lbs total weight and sold 21,240 lbs on December 11th. We had budgeted both buying and selling at about \$.90/lb. That would have netted us \$5,076. We did a little better than that, as we bought in at \$.89/lb and sold on a very strong market this fall. Two of the seventeen bigger heifers did not settle in the five months that they were exposed to the bull and brought the exact same dollar amount as we paid for them. Of course, the death loss is absorbed in the above weights. We figure that the actual average daily gain for these heifers was about 1.4 lbs/day. This is lower than what we normally would expect from our heifers and may be because they came off a corn silage ration and were carrying very good flesh when we bought them.

We'll try to double the number of head next year. Profit wasn't huge, but this was a low-risk way to increase profits by playing to our strengths.

Stewart Barn Talk

