As recently as 2020 dairy farms have come under fire for their management of bull calves. Some farms rely on artificial insemination (AI) to maintain replacement numbers. This allows a wide variety of choices to individual producers. Strategies such as using sexed semen when breeding highly valued cows increases the chances of carrying forward desired family traits from dam to daughter. For less desirable genetic profiles, it can be advantageous to use beef semen. These calves, regardless of sex, have been commanding good market value, even as young stock. However, depending on the size of the dairy herd, and the amount of calves being produced each year, a number of these animals could potentially remain on the farm until maturity, and enter the local beef market, rather than being transported out of the state as calves. It is worth noting that AI doesn’t work well on every farm, in which case a different management practice should be followed.

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**Keeping Different Bulls**

Another strategy would be to keep one bull of the farm’s desired breed and genetic quality, and a second “clean up” bull, usually a beef breed of some kind. The black angus and hereford breeds have been selected over the last 40-50 years for low birth weights, but fast weight gain, since ranchers often raise and enter the local beef market, rather than being transported out of the state as calves. It is worth noting that AI doesn’t work well on every farm, in which case a different management practice should be followed.

**Direct Marketing**

There are farmers who excel at making deals, and are able to find local homesteaders to take well-started bull calves. This often requires care with administering colostrum, disbudding, castration, and some extra time in the herd until the homesteader is ready, but can often pay off in the form of mutually advantageous barter negotiations. This also seems to work for those farms managing lower herd numbers.

Whichever method is working on your farm, it is always worth considering the animal welfare aspect. Organic certification standards dictate that livestock be allowed to move and act in natural ways. This is leading to a redirection of how dairy farms have traditionally managed calf housing and feeding. While there are health reasons to separate calves from dams at birth, there’s copious amounts of evidence that group housing and frequent feedings only benefit a farm’s production in the long run. There’s even a school of thought that when calves are group housed, it reduces the likelihood of rogue cows and bulls that injure and kill humans, since they can learn normal cattle behavior and social structure from each other, rather than targeting their human caregivers as tiers in the pecking order.

If dairy wants to remain relevant in a market filled with plant-based options, we have to stop and consider what our traditional management practices look like to a population two generations removed from animal agriculture. Additionally, if we want to maintain a quality product, it comes from well-managed livestock. Pain and stress always reduce the gains that keep livestock production profitable.