Cattle Health and Welfare Group

Dairy bull calves - summary of progress to date

The Dairy Cattle Welfare Strategy for GB highlights calf and youngstock survival as a priority. The dairy industry's aspiration is to increase the percentage of dairy bull calves that are utilised in the food chain, to reduce the number of calves euthanised on farm and to reduce the number of calves exported.

Entering the beef supply chain

The number of dairy bull calves retained in the British beef chain rose from 245,586 in 2006 to 392,473 in 2015 – a rise of 59%. Official estimates indicate that 81 per cent of all male calves born to in the GB dairy herd in 2015 were reared for beef in GB (Figure 1, 2 & Table 1).

There are positive examples of how the supply chain is trying to develop markets for dairy bull calves. A number of retailers including the Co-operative, Waitrose and Morrisons, now have high-welfare calf schemes in place to help ensure best practice in the supply chain. Morrisons, for instance, is currently working with Buitelaar as part of its sustainable dairy bull calf scheme. Both the Co-operative and Waitrose have launched schemes which aim to connect their dairy and beef producers to ensure dairy calves are retained in their supply chains for either veal or beef. These schemes aid transparency and traceability in the dairy and beef supply chains and allow information to be fed back to the farmer on animal performance. The aim of these schemes is to reduce wastage and improve welfare by making use of animals which might otherwise be euthanised at birth. Whilst these calf schemes relieve some of the pressure on farmers to rear or find a market for dairy bull calves they can only take a limited number of calves and are dependent on consumer demand. Farmers also need to be able to meet retailer welfare and carcase specifications to be eligible to join these schemes. As such there is still a limited market for certain breeds of bull calves (e.g. channel island) or for farms which are under TB restrictions.

Euthanised at birth

The number of bull calves unregistered and likely to have been euthanised on farm reduced from 84,817 in 2006 to 64,883 in 2013, a reduction of 23 per cent. In this seven year period, the numbers of dairy calves euthanised on farm as a percentage of those born declined from 21 per cent to 14 per cent.

In 2014 and 2015, this rose to 19 per cent (Figure 3). Grain prices also rose making it more difficult to generate margins from feeding cattle. This indicates the challenges farmers still face with market volatility. Increasing market volatility means that both input costs and cattle prices exhibit peaks and troughs in an unpredictable pattern**.** A number of retailers ban the euthanizing and exporting of dairy bull calves as part of their contract with dairy farmers. Some of these retailers protect their farmers from market volatility by providing a pricing mechanism which is decoupled from the calf market.

Increased usage of sexed semen is one way of reducing the numbers of bull calves born in the dairy herd. In 2017, the NFU reported a 7 per cent increase in the number of farmers using sexed semen compared to the previous year. The number of farmers using sexed semen increased from 60 per cent in 2016 to 67 per cent in 2017. Data collected by AHDB Dairy indicates a steady increase in purchases of Holstein sexed semen over the past 6 years, from 12.6 per cent to 17.9 per cent of semen sales (Table 2). Sexed semen usage will continue to rise as confidence in the technology grows, more semen is sexed, and the premium over unsexed semen reduces.

Reduction in live exports

The reduction in live exports of calves has been the most noticeable success. The number of calves exported reduced from 80,700 to less than 2,000, a reduction of 98 per cent from 2006 to 2014. The live export trade is negligible compared with 20 years ago. The 2,000 calves that went to other countries in 2014 compared to the pre-BSE days when 500,000 dairy calves went abroad shows the progress made.

Dairy farmers have been given new opportunities for their dairy bull calves to be reared in high welfare markets in the domestic beef and veal market and traditional overseas markets have closed down. In 2014, less than 0.5 per cent of dairy calves born were exported abroad.

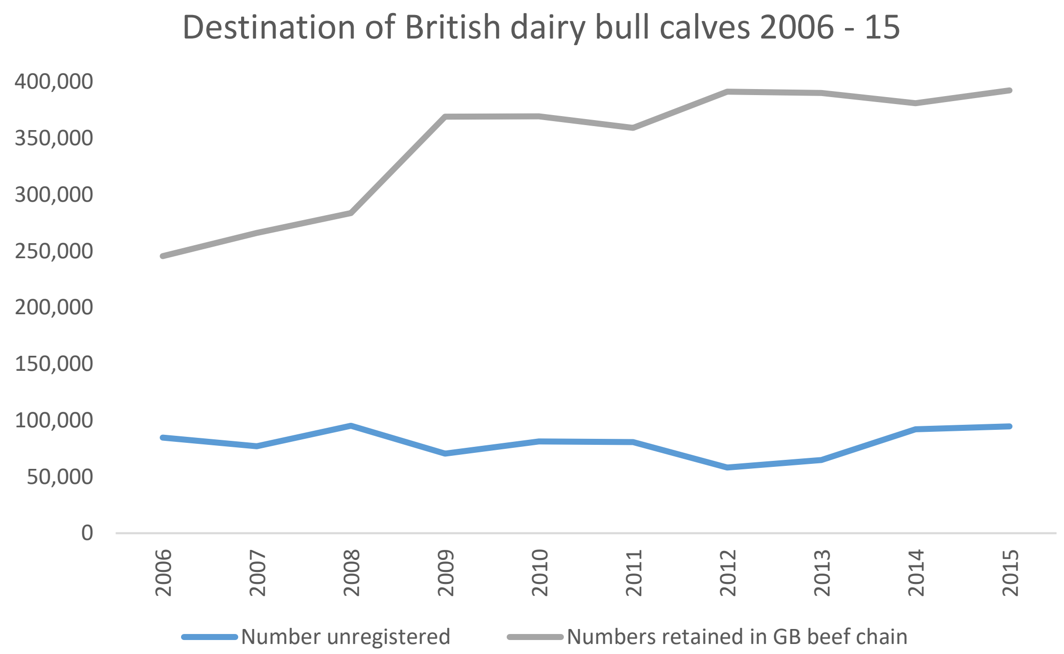
TB restrictions

TB continues to be the most significant animal health problem facing cattle farmers in England and Wales. The marketing options for bull calves on TB restricted dairy herds is very limited. They can only be moved to an Approved Finishing Unit (AFU) or to an isolation unit. However, all calves need to be from a single source where a large group is moved in one go, this is rarely practical for many herds. There are two options of AFUs available, with or without grazing. AFUs with grazing are limited and under threat with no new ones being approved. Very few non-grazing AFUs want to rear and fatten young dairy calves up to slaughter, as this is not economically viable for the business. The calf buying groups mentioned above have relieved some pressure, however, they can only deal with limited numbers and are usually full to capacity and unable to take on any new TB breakdown herds. This is one of the main reasons why some dairy bull calves are euthanised on TB restricted farms as there is an extremely limited market for their sale, and even when sold the price achieved barely covers the cost of rearing them to that age.

The future

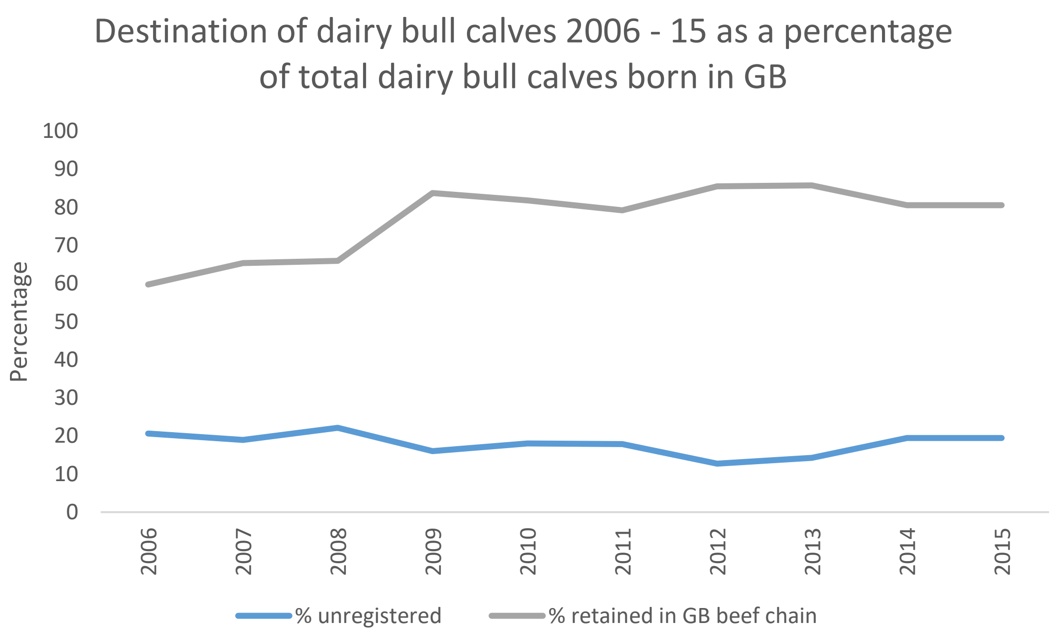
Substantial progress has been made but there is still room for improvement. Industry will continue to work together to improve the number of dairy bull calves reared for beef. There is optimism over the rise of sexed semen and farmers will continue to be encouraged to make use of appropriate sexed semen to reduce the number of male calves.

Figure 1.



Source: AHDB 2018/BCMS

Figure 2.



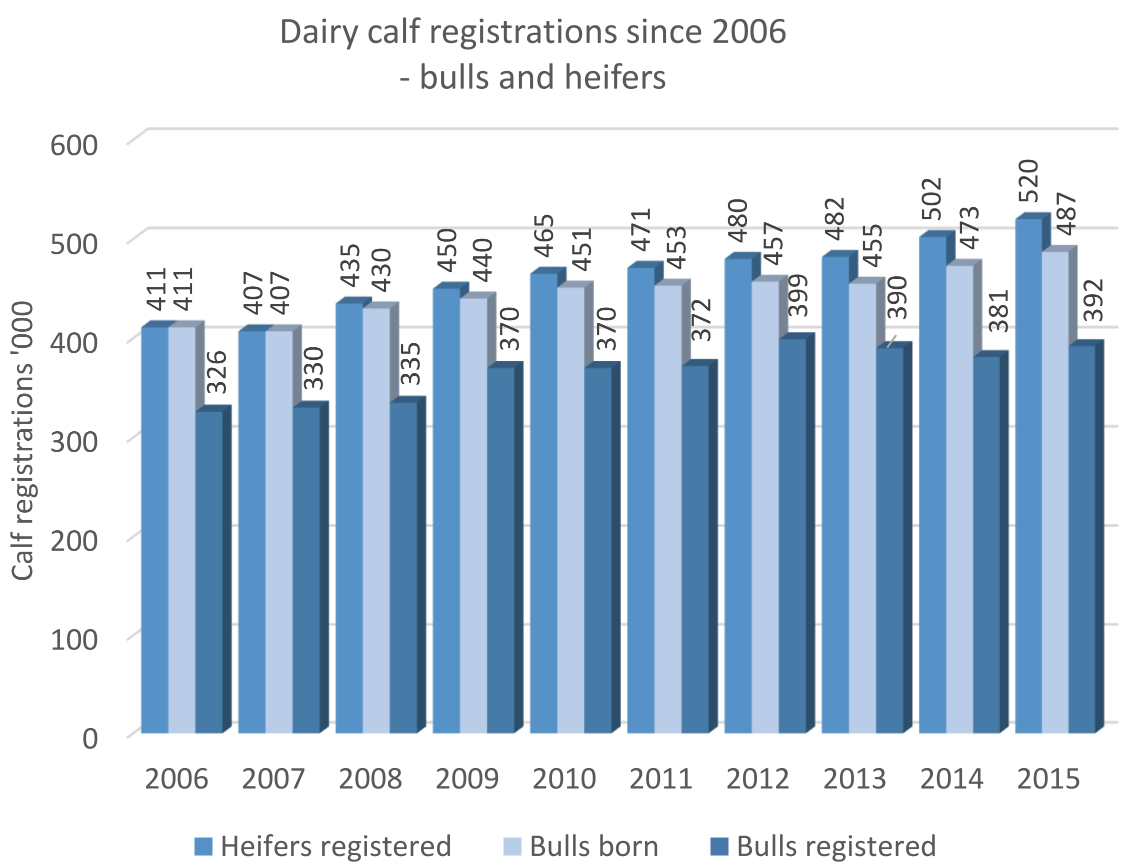
Source: AHDB 2018/BCMS

Table 1. Uptake of dairy bull calves in the food chain

	Number of bull calves retained	% bull calves retained of number born
2006	245586	60
2007	266282	65
2008	283695	66
2009	369273	84
2010	369593	82
2011	359187	79
2012	391309	86
2013	390260	85
2014	381162	80
2015	392473	81

Source: AHDB 2018/BCMS

Figure 3. Trends in calf registrations



Source: AHDB 2018/ BCMS

Table 2. Sexed semen sales as percentage of total national semen sales

Year	**Sexed semen sales as % national total**
2012	12.3
2013	14.4
2014	15.4
2015	16.6
2016	15.9
2017	17.9

Source: AHDB 2018

If you have any questions or comments, please contact a representative at:

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For more detailed information about further work and progress of CHAWG, visit our website at www.chawg.org.uk

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