



Dexter cattle

Farm Diversification Information Service, Bendigo

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This Agriculture Note provides information on Dexter cattle and the industry.

Product

Dexters (also called Kerrys in some parts of the world) are descended from the black cattle of the Celts. They were established as a distinct breed in the mid eighteenth century. They are the smallest naturally occurring British breed, although some other breeds have been "miniaturized" in recent years. Measured over the spine at the point of the hip, ideal heights for cows are 97cm – 107cm (102cm – 112cm for bulls). There are two types; "short legged" will be at the bottom of the height range, "long legged" or "proportionate" will be at the top of the height range. Classed as a dual purpose (meat/milk) breed, Dexters are ideally suited to small acreages. There are around 700 registered breeders in Australia (114 in Victoria), and about 9,000 registered animals (nearly 3000 purebred).

Dexters are whole coloured, usually black, with red or dun less common. Traditionally a horned breed, these days they are often de-horned and may also be polled.

Physical Requirements

Dexters require the same facilities as other cattle, but because of their size, they are well suited to smaller acreages. Generally they have good temperaments and yards and fences need not be as high as for larger breeds. As a dual purpose breed appealing to the hobby farmer market, consider milking facilities. There is a consistent market for house cows.

Production

Although small, Dexter cows can produce around ten litres of milk a day, making them suitable for supplying milk for the family or for suckling an extra calf. Whilst on their dams, Dexter calves gain weight rapidly. Depending on the type, purebred Dexters can reach a liveweight of 300-400 kgs, with crossbred animals proportionately heavier. Bulls reach 450 kgs by 3 years of age.

Dexter beef carcasses average 55% dress out, and are typified by smaller, leaner, but still tender, cuts, suitable for the home freezer. Where Health Regulations permit, there is a significant market for custom kills. Because of their lower feed requirement, about 40% more Dexters can be run than other cattle breeds. Dexter Cattle Australia

allows a grading up program over four generations (females only) to reach purebred status, after which bull calves from graded up purebred females can be registered. Artificial insemination is an option as semen is available from a wide range of local and imported sources.

However, it is likely that the herd book will be closed to new, first cross females in the next few years.

Marketing

Whilst earlier Australian Dexters were mainly acquired from Britain and North America, new sources of genetic material have recently been imported from Denmark, South Africa, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. This indicates that the interest in the breed is still strong and demonstrates a determination by breeders to continue to improve the quality of the Australian Dexter herd. Although black is the predominant colour, red and dun are also acceptable and quality red stock currently commands premium prices. The extremely high prices commanded during the early establishment phase have gone, and the prices now more accurately reflect the quality of the stock for sale. Part bred animals are still in demand as foundation stock.

Financial Aspects

Registered purebred Dexter females attract prices from \$1000-\$6000, with both ends of this range being unusual. Prices will usually correlate with quality and there are plenty of animals readily available.

Embryos are also sold, either frozen or implanted in recipient cows, for less than half that cost. However, there are costs associated with implantation and no guarantee of success; recipient cows are expensive and the quality or even sex of the resultant calf will not be known. It is cheaper to breed up, but it will take a lot longer. Semen prices range from \$25 – over \$100.

Organisations & Contacts

Dexter Cattle Australia (Inc.) c/- ABRI
University of New England
Armidale NSW Australia 2351
Phone: 02 6773 3471 Fax 02 6772 5376
Web site: <http://www.dexter.une.edu.au>

The Dexter Group of Victoria (South)
Rosemary Schriver (Sec.)
Phone: 03 5797 8328

Other State and Regional Promotion groups – details
available from the Association

References

“Kerry and Dexter Cattle – and other ancient Irish Breeds”
PL Curran (Historical)

“Dexter Cattle” J Hays (American Dexters)

Brochures and information available through the Dexter
Association (details above-also visit the Website)

Back copies of “The Dexter Journal” also available
through the Association

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