

# The British suckler beef industry – improving primary business objectives

by Richard Fuller, technical director, Beef Improvement Group Ltd.

The British suckler beef industry has been disadvantaged by its reliance on dairy cross beef bred females as the main source of herd replacements.

The dominance of the Holstein has led to reduced production efficiency and higher costs in suckler herds making them less competitive in global markets and quite unable to exist economically without significant levels of EU subsidies.

I recognised the deteriorating trends in breeding performance during the early 1990s and the situation became a lot more urgent in 1996 when the BSE catastrophe hit the industry. It was then that a group of producers in Yorkshire formed the Beef Improvement Group Ltd (BIG).

The main aims of the company were to develop a UK suckler cow breeding programme to improve output efficiency, to reduce production costs and to produce a consistent high eating quality product.



To study the principles of breeding more efficient suckler cows, members of BIG travelled to the USA to visit the USDA Meat Animal Research Centre (MARC) in Nebraska.



We were impressed by the way the scientists had used the genetic differences between breeds in cross-breeding systems to develop low cost, high output cow types which produced progeny that consistently matched carcass grading and eating quality standards required by the meat processors.

As part of their work, researchers at the Centre had developed a composite breed known as the MARC II.

This was created by crossing together two British native breeds, the Hereford and Angus, and two continental maternal breeds, the Simmental and Gelbvieh.

This combination of breeds has been shown to retain high levels of hybrid vigour and delivers critically important economic benefits.

The British breeds are forage efficient and

easy calving, so keeping feed and labour costs down. They also have very good eating quality characteristics. The continental breeds contribute higher growth rate and improved carcass yield.

All these advantages are combined together to create one of the most efficient beef cows available and this 'new' breed is marketed commercially as the Stabiliser.

## UK development

The first 100 Stabiliser embryos were imported into the UK by BIG in 1998 to establish a nucleus breeding herd. Since then the growing popularity of the breed has contributed to its significant expansion.

Today, over 8,000 Stabiliser cows are performance recorded on a national data base in around 60 herds and a further 150 herd owners are using Stabiliser genetics to improve the financial viability of their businesses.

BIG manages the breeding programme and continues to import new bloodlines from the USA to maintain genetic diversity.

The Stabiliser breeding programme is designed to optimise performance to maximise profit at farm level.

**Table 1. Benchmarking Stabilisers against EBLEX (the organisation for the English beef industry) performance recorded data 2008-2009.**

	EBLEX third top	Stabiliser recorded performance
Barren cows (per 100)	8.5	3
Calves born alive (per 100)	89.9	98
Calves died (per 100)	1.8	1
Calves reared (per 100)	88.1	96
Calving period (weeks)	18	9

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Key Stabiliser profit drivers include:

- Excellent fertility – maximise reproductive performance.
- Low birth weight – calving ease, high calf survival.
- Early puberty – two year first calving.
- Forage efficient – lower costs.
- High growth – maximise output.
- Robust structure and docile temperament – minimise management costs.
- Consistent uniformity – improves marketing.
- Consistent high eating quality – branding potential.

When the recorded performance of Stabiliser herds is benchmarked against national data collected from sample herds by EBLEX, the advantages the Stabiliser delivers are demonstrated in Tables 1 and 2.

<b>Increase output (£)</b>	
Reduced calving interval from 15 to 9 weeks	
Rear 5% more calves	63
<b>Savings (£)</b>	
Heifers calving at two years	67
Reduce replacement rate from 20% to 12%	43
Feed, vet and labour	50
<b>Total (£)</b>	<b>223</b>
Total financial gains £223/per cow: £22,300 per 100 cows	

**Table 2. Improved physical performance leads to significant financial benefits.**

Improved physical performance also contributes to reducing carbon emissions from the Stabiliser breeding system by maximising:

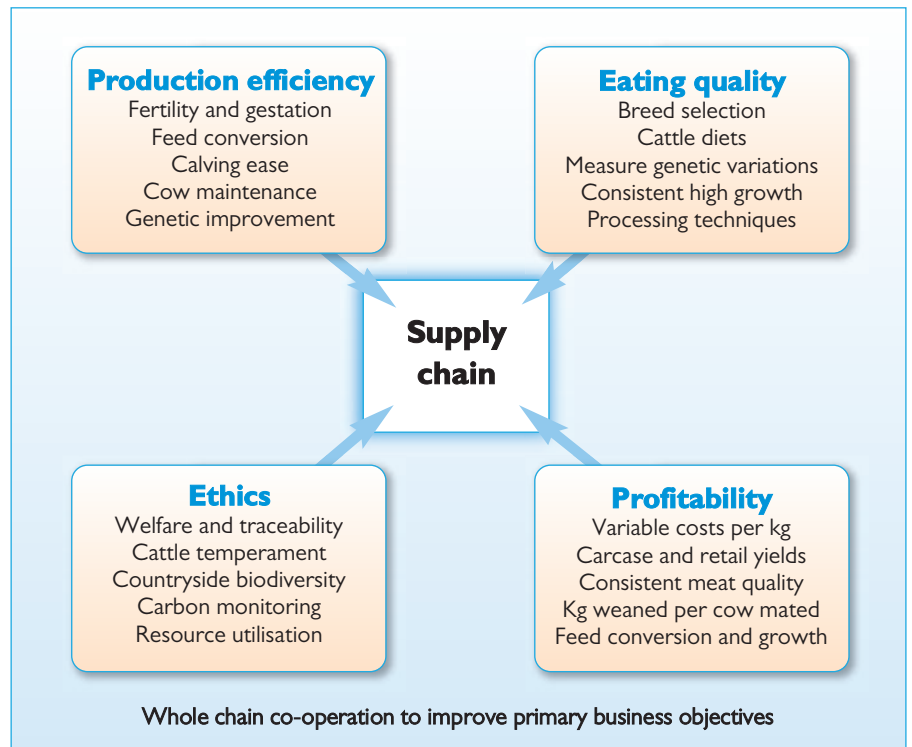
- Production output – higher number of calves reared.
- Breeding efficiency – high fertility and two year first calving.
- Animal performance – genetic improvement and animal disease prevention.
- Resource utilisation efficiency – lower feed input.

## Meat marketing

The company then started to research marketing opportunities to develop a brand for the beef. The consistent, excellent eating quality of the product was soon established through various tastings with chefs and butchers.

Working with a local family butcher, BIG has established a blueprint to produce outstanding tender, succulent and full flavoured beef every time it is eaten. The product was branded 'Givendale Prime', it has full provenance and it has earned many flattering testimonials.

The Givendale Prime blueprint is as follows:



**Fig. 1. Supply chain partnership of Beef Improvement Group, Morrisons and Woodheads.**

- Reared on grass or silage based diets – improves flavour.
- Docile temperament – improves tenderness.
- Adequate fat cover and marbling – improves cookability and flavour.
- Fine grained meat – improves texture.
- Hind quarters matured on the bone for 21 days – improves tenderness and flavour.

Further attempts to develop the brand with other wholesalers and retailers have been thwarted by carcase balance and price issues.

## Partnership agreement

In order to establish a more robust marketing strategy to deal with the growing num-



ber of cattle being produced by the expanding breeding programme, BIG has entered into a partnership with Wm Morrison Plc/Woodheads to develop a more efficient and sustainable supply chain of fresh beef.

The supermarket currently processes around 3000 cattle every week at its Woodheads abattoirs in Turriff, Colne and Spalding supplying beef to its 420+ British stores. Morrisons is the only major UK retailer committed to selling 100% fresh British beef.

It is anticipated the new partnership will lead to competitive advantages for all parts of the supply chain and has the potential to further improve the eating quality of beef.

The Beef Improvement Group is committed to building up its strong producer base and Morrisons/Woodheads are able to offer farmers an exceptional supply of carcase performance data back down the supply chain.

The partnership will be working in a number of key technical areas to help achieve supply chain efficiencies.

This includes establishing a mechanism to improve eating quality, carcase yield and retail value and linking these to the genetic assessment of beef sires.

We will also be assessing the feed efficiency of beef sires by measuring individual feed intake to improve resource utilisation and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Having established a highly efficient production base with the Stabiliser, the next logical step for BIG breeders and finishers is to capitalise on being an integral part of a more efficient supply chain and this relationship with Morrisons/Woodheads will give all those involved that opportunity. ■