

Dairy farmers debate breeding technique that boosts milking cows by thousands

Method can produce females in about 90 percent of pregnancies.

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By ROBERT RODRIGUEZ

The use of a specialized breeding technique to boost the number of milking cows by thousands is generating debate in California's dairy industry.

Some say it doesn't make sense to produce more milk as farmers struggle with low prices, high debt and an oversupply. But supporters of the technology say it could be a valuable tool for efficiently raising more cows -- and ultimately ramping up production when demand rises.

In the central San Joaquin Valley, the heart of the nation's dairy industry, the slumping dairy economy has hit farmers hard. Many dairy farmers are losing money, while others have left the industry.

At issue is the use of a breeding technique called sexed semen that can produce more heifers -- females -- than bulls.

Normal breeding practices generally produce about an equal number of female and male offspring. Using sexed semen, about 90 percent of pregnancies result in females.

"I just don't think it is in our best interest right now," said Tom Barcellos, a dairy operator in Porterville.

In 2006, when the technique began to be used nationally, it resulted in about 8,000 new heifers entering milk production by late 2008.

This year, that number is estimated to go up to 63,000, and it is expected to reach 161,000 by 2010, said Albert De Vries, associate professor in the Department of Animal Sciences at the University of Florida. After that, the numbers are expected to drop because the technique is not being used as often.

"The short-term thinking at the time was that because replacement heifers were expensive, farmers thought it was cheaper to raise their own," De Vries said. "But all that changed."

Dairy exports began to decline steeply, while domestic consumption remained soft. To slash production, a dairy-funded group -- Cooperatives Working Together -- reduced the nation's herd size by 226,000 cows. Prior to the reduction, the nation's dairy herd was estimated at 9.2 million in 2008.

De Vries said that while the use of sexed semen has slowed significantly, it remains a tool for the dairy industry.

"It is up to the industry to figure out how to use it wisely," De Vries said. "No one benefits when you are just creating a bigger cow population." William Van Dam, CEO of the Alliance of Western Milk Producers in Sacramento, doesn't fault dairy operators for using the practice.

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Two years ago, milk prices were at an all-time high, and the chance to add more heifers was considered a smart move.

"The world seemed to take any amount of milk that we could produced," Van Dam said. "But the market collapsed, and now we are sitting with too many heifers."

Hanford dairy operator Dino Giacomazzi tried the new breeding technology, hoping to increase the number of heifers on his 900-cow dairy. He also thought about possibly selling them to other dairy operators.

But the dairy market crashed and Giacomazzi abandoned the practice. He now has serious concerns about its potential effect on an industry that is showing signs of recovery.

"We ramped up so quickly to meet global demand for milk, and we went and stuck our necks out," Giacomazzi said. "But when demand went away, we got our heads cut off."

Barbara Martin, a Lemoore dairy operator, said that the technology could be valuable if it doesn't cause a glut of milk. She, like others, is pushing for a national supply-management program.