

1) Scientific evidence

Report P43/2008 mentions scientific evidence in favour of semen importation, based on a report prepared by Dr. Maurice Bichard in July 2003

An independent report on genetic resource management in livestock, funded by DEFRA and the EC, which offers a very different viewpoint and which can be viewed at <http://www.nature.com/hdy/journal/v92/n5/full/6800433a.html> was received in October 2002 and published in March 2004, 8 months after Dr. Bichard's report. It is entitled "**Population genetic structure of and inbreeding in an insular cattle breed, the Jersey, and its implications for genetic resource management**". It recommends AGAINST semen importation and even suggests it may have a negative effect. It is well worth reading. I quote a section from its conclusion:

"Despite the increasing worries of farmers that inbreeding was accumulating across the island, our results suggest that the Jersey Island cattle is just as variable as many other breeds. The level of inbreeding is low and does not appear to justify imports of semen from other Jersey populations. While imports could indeed bring new alleles or genotypes, it is far from clear whether it is really necessary.

Our recommendation of keeping the island isolated also draws from the experience of the Hereford cattle, another ubiquitous breed with huge success outside its area of origin. Blott et al (1998b) have shown that, for this British breed, **imports from Canadian populations with higher performance have negatively affected the genetic diversity** of the Hereford in the British Isles. The reason for this is that as soon as imports are possible, the risk exists that farmers will tend to import semen offered from the same sires, potentially reducing the gene pool for future generations."

2) Positive vote by registered milk producers

Much emphasis in the report has been placed on the fact that a majority of "registered milk producers" are in favour of the proposition. There are 29 registered milk producers, of which at the time of the report 15 were in favour and 14 against. There are two points to be made here:-

- a) since that time the balance has swung against the proposal in that there are now only 10 definitely in favour, 15 against and 4 as yet unknown.
- b) a decision to reverse something which has been in force for well over 200 years is being made on the basis of the views of not many more than 10 people in an island population of over 80,000. It may have been endorsed by the RJA council and the Jersey Milk Marketing Board, but many of the members of those bodies are the very same dairy producers that voted in the RJA & HS ballot. Something so "historically valuable" should surely have been voted upon by all members of the RJA and not just registered producers. In the last ballot in 2003, the RJA & HS gave all members their right to vote. At that time, cattle owning members received 2 votes and non-cattle owning members received 1 vote. Despite the views of Dr Bichard having been made public and the fact that cattle owning members had twice the number of votes as non-cattle owners, there was still a majority of the RJA membership against lifting the ban on importation of semen.

My family has been members of the RJA for over 50 years and none of us was told that a ballot of registered dairy producers had been made and that the RJA Council was taking a proposition to the States in favour of semen importation. My late father and my mother only gave up being "registered producers" in 2002. My mother and I still maintain an active interest in that I own a cow which was Supreme Champion at last May's Island Cattle Show, indeed a great honour. The judge, Mr Nick Dain from Norfolk, UK said of all the cattle at that show

"I was truly impressed by the scope, dairyness and size of these cows here today. These cows would stand up anywhere in the UK"

This does not suggest that we need to import genetics.

It is said that “registered milk producers ... have a vested interest in a sustainable future for the industry”. As Anne Perchard is quoted in the Jersey Evening Post as saying, importation of semen is needed as farmers have to “pay their bills and try to make their farms profitable”. I don’t deny that dairy farmers need to make a living, but I don’t believe importing semen is the answer or that it will make farming any more profitable. Will the Jersey Milk Marketing Board suddenly start paying farmers more money for their milk? With the extremely difficult export markets, even the agricultural consultants, Promar, acknowledge:

“One of the key components of the industry’s recovery roadmap is the development of export markets. The market for commodity dairy products is extremely competitive and largely driven by supply and demand. Given the low cost basis and cyclical nature of these markets, it is highly unlikely that the Jersey dairy sector could profitably compete in this arena”.

3) Island herd is some 17% to 20% less productive than UK Jersey cattle

The RJA’s report suggests that in comparative studies and within similar conditions, on average, the above is true. It must be pointed out, as Promar dairy consultants tell us, that “in the UK milk recording is entirely voluntary, costs £15 - £20 per cow and only around half the UK herds choose to use it. It is a self-selected group and not a UK all herd average”.

By contrast to this, all herds in Jersey are milk-recorded, thus it must be very difficult indeed to make any meaningful comparisons.

4) Minimum threshold of 5000 breeding animals

It is mentioned in the P43/2008 report that without this minimum threshold of 5000 breeding females, the Island herd is unsustainable as a closed population. Between 2002 and 2008, the dairy industry actively encouraged farmers to sell up by initiating restructuring schemes and paying incentives, because there was too much milk being produced. We are told this has reduced the milking population to 3000 and that this is unsustainable. One wonders why it was actively encouraged if it was thought it would be unsustainable. However, I do not see it as unsustainable, as even though large numbers of animals were exported, the female lines have, for the most part, been retained by the remaining farmers. One dairy farmer was recently quoted as saying he had no less than 52 breeding lines in his one herd. I also know of other farmers, who have ensured the continuation of the female breeding lines by buying selected females from herds being dispersed. It is therefore of less consequence that there are fewer herds now, because as long as the female breeding lines are within these herds, the genetics will still be there.

5) Importation of non-Jersey Semen

Report P43/2008 states that passing this proposition will allow for not only Jersey bull semen, but also beef and other dairy breeds. If we allow this, then the Jersey herd is no longer unique, iconic and historically valuable – it is just the same as anywhere else in the world.

The RJA and HS website reinforces just how unique the Jersey cow is. I quote:

“...the ‘Jersey’ is a product of the Island, its soil, its climate, its people and their history.

Local farmers concentrated on developing their cattle from the limited local population and their skill ‘fixed’ the special characteristics of the ‘Jersey’ resulting in the cattle we see today. The Island breed is recognised internationally as a unique population of livestock”.

As the RJA say above, it is the ‘skill’ of the local farmers which is all-important. Genetics obviously plays a part, but without both skill in seeing what will work well and also management skills, nothing will be achieved. The genetics are here in the Island; it is just a case of being able to use them to advantage and to suit local conditions. As an eminent South African breeder said of my late father on writing to my mother:

“To meet your husband, to learn from him, to study his methods ... I regard as one of the really outstanding privileges of my life. One seldom meets a person who combines so many outstanding qualities. I knew him as an honourable man a great gentleman and in animal breeding a genius. He created the most outstanding bloodline in the history of Jersey breeding. It may take science a 100 years or more to understand and appreciate what he did in animal breeding”.

6) Export trade in pedigree cattle

Report P43/2008 also suggests that the “import of bovine semen will reinvigorate the export trade for pedigree Jersey Island cattle”. I fail to see the logic of this. Why would buyers come to Jersey, when they already have the so-called “improved genetics” in their own countries? If we import the genetics, we are just getting what they already have and there would be the added freight costs of getting the animals from Jersey, which is one of the reasons that the export trade from Jersey has lessened in recent times.

Another possible reason for the lack of semen exports to other countries is that several e.g. USA, South Africa, have strict regulations to be adhered to before they even contemplate importing semen to their countries. In Jersey, until 2003, we had an AI centre which indeed had the facilities to comply with other countries strict regulations e.g. bulls must be quarantined for a length of time before semen is drawn etc etc. For some reason, the AI Centre in Jersey was shut down at the start of 2003, so we no longer have the facilities required to export to other countries. It is therefore no wonder that there are virtually no semen exports, except maybe to the UK, where regulations are not so strict.

The RJA and HS on their current website also attribute it to the following
“As importing countries have developed their own national herds to suit their particular conditions the export of cattle has declined in recent years”

The RJA gets right to the point here in that it is the ‘particular conditions’ of a country (or island in our case), which determines how a breed develops. Jersey is an island and its cattle should be determined by its conditions, not attempting to make it into something it isn’t.

7) Guernsey and importation of semen

Report P43/2008 says that in Guernsey “international pedigree Guernsey bull semen has been used widely to improve genetics of the Island strain. Milk yields ... in Guernsey have improved in line with the world population ...” How is it then that Guernsey was short of milk in 2005 on more than one occasion and had to import some from Jersey ? How is it also that an attempt was made by Guernsey politicians in 2005 to lift the ban in Guernsey of liquid milk imports, causing great concern to Guernsey dairy farmers? It would not appear that the importation of Guernsey bull semen into Guernsey has been successful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would ask you to consider all these points and take note of the opposing scientific evidence presented in the March 2004 report. It is certainly not clear-cut that importing semen will give the results that those in favour wish for. As this is the case, it is surely not worth the risk of losing such a unique, historic herd. P43/2008 report states that “the RJA and HS has maintained a bank of semen from every bull that has been collected over the last 20 years”. The Island of Jersey and dairy farmers, therefore, already have a wide range of genetics from which to select and if used wisely, the cattle breeders of today can improve their herds as befits Jersey’s soil, climate, people and its history.

Kate Le Ruez