

Efforts to Conserve the Kerry Breed of Cattle in the US

By Shannon Nichols

History Lesson

Rather than reinvent the wheel, I've included a short history of the Kerry cattle in the US that I found in a publication presented by an intern at Kelmscott Farm Foundation in 2001.

“According to Bixby et al., Kerry cattle were first imported to the United States from Ireland in 1818. The breed remained prevalent until the early 20th century, although they were never geographically widespread. American farmers at the time, like those in Ireland, valued the Kerry's hardiness and ability to thrive on poor conditions. The American Kerry and Dexter Cattle Society was founded in 1911. However, the Kerry breed soon lost popularity because they were unable to compete with the milk production of the other dairy breeds that were kept in good conditions and the registry closed in 1921. Sadly, by the 1930's the Kerry had practically disappeared from North America and by 1983 the world population of registered Kerries dropped to 200. They began to be reimported to the United States in the 1970's. Today, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy has listed the status of the Kerry breed as critical. This means that there are fewer than 200 North American annual registrations and the global population is fewer than 2,000. However, it is through their inclusion and noted importance at historical sites and foundations, as well as the undying efforts of those people who love the breed and are involved in conservation breeding, that the Kerry is able to exist in America today.” Kristen Hussey, 2001

Introduction

A group of U.S. Kerry breeders began a series of phone conversations about the status of the breed in the U.S. and what can be done to develop a strategy to conserve the breed.

The original conversation led to three initial objectives:

- Start a network of breeders in the four countries that house populations of Kerry cattle. This included Ireland, UK, Canada and the US. The premise was to see who was out there, understand the status of the breed in those countries and begin discussions about how to develop a combined effort to conserve the genetics in those four countries. This led to the formation of the yahoo.group “KerryCows”.
- Explore population control options. This focused on initial conversations with Jeannette Beranger at ALBC to see what we could do to help us insure that we didn't keep increasing the inbreeding values in the herds in the host countries (US in particular). This would include a survey of existing breeders/owners/collectors of the breed to insure that we accounted for every reproducing animal. Conversations also developed about how to handle critical herds that didn't register animals anymore (one in particular in the US) and non-profit ownership and their precarious status.
- Start to collect semen and embryos from major families of Kerry cattle in the US. This will offer breeders two things, insurance against loss of herd bulls/disease, etc and the ability to increase outside genetics in herds that have higher

inbreeding values. It was also discussed that semen sales could also be a way to raise funds for the breeders and an organization of breeders in the U.S.

Today

Since our original conversations, the US breeders have been able to learn a lot about the breed and their status in other countries. There are some positive and negative concerns that have come up.

Canada. They have more problems with their national herd than we do. Their representatives have goals and a vision that does not make the US breeders comfortable with a joint Canada/US association. Some of these concerns include:

- Allowing animals that do not adhere to the breed standards set by the Irish Kerry Cattle Society. This includes colored cows and upgraded cows. Ireland has to allow red animals in an appendix style registration process due to EU mandates, but they are not considered pure and offspring cannot be registered as pure Kerry cattle. Some breeders in Canada are focusing breeding efforts on developing colored strains.
- Due to the lack of a Kerry Cattle Association in Canada, the Canadian Livestock Records Corporation has allowances for upgraded animals are not pure and the concern regarding gene erosion that is prevalent in so many breeds is of concern to US breeders.
- More than one registry of the Kerry Cattle. The US breeders use the Irish registry exclusively. While the Canadian's have to follow Canadian Law regarding the registration of animals with a Canadian registry, the American breeders can register with anyone and see absolutely nothing wrong with the current process of registering animals with the Irish Society. We don't care for the tone of Canadian breeders regarding the US ability to manage registrations of our animals. We don't have their problem.
- The formation of a North American Kerry Association in Canada will focus attention on the problems of unregistered Canadian Cattle and not the needs of the breed as a whole. Past efforts to form an association in Canada have failed. The breeders are fragmented and they do not have a common voice. While US breeders want to help and support efforts in Canada, we feel that our vision and theirs are not the same and will not solidify a group effort enough to develop and implement a clear plan for the breed.
- The Canadians are interested in doing something with the breed. They do have a couple of dynamic people who may be able to pull something together to meet their needs.

Both US & Canada

- Speculators. There is a possibility that the Kerry Cows become the next Alpaca or other exotic animal. The surge in interest is of specific concern. We have identified a number of people in US and Canada that are interested in registering animals that resemble Kerry Cattle to take advantage of high prices of the animals. (note: current owners of some Colpitts Kerry cattle, Michigan dairy farmer and recent high sale of Kerry cow to Washington state collector). While this movement can allow for the expansion of numbers, it also allows the possibility of the inclusion of animals that are suspect.

US

- Non-profit organizations were instrumental in the maintenance of the breed in the US. Due to the nature of non-profits, goals and the whims of staff contributed to the loss of genetics. There are two remaining non-profits with ownership of the Kerry cattle in the US. Plimoth Plantation has two remaining breeding females and some older semen. John Truleson does work with existing breeders and is interested in supporting efforts to conserve the breed. NEHBC is in the process of dissolving their assets and closing their doors. Rumors are rumors and some of the breeders have stated their position on the future of the breed. Their whims are very with staff and the status of 5 breeding females and some bulls is in waiting.
- There is not an adequate census of the breed in the US. There are lists and lists of breeders both past and present, but there is an effort in process to find everyone. American numbers may be 50 breeding females, we don't know.
- Inbreeding. It appears that there may be four families in the US. Breeders need outside genetics. We also need a program that helps breeders identify bull/cow matings that will help the breed as a whole. SPARKS or similar programs are of interest.
- There are about 5 breeders that milk their Kerry's with commercial dairy cattle. Interest in milk recorded or potential lines are of specific interest. Cow calf style breeders are willing to use these bloodlines to help improve overall breed milk output potential.

The Plan

The US Kerry Cattle breeders have decided to develop a strategy for the conservation of the Kerry Cattle in the US. We will support the Canadians, but feel that their problems and goals are not consistent with ours. A core group of existing Kerry breeders will work with the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy and the Irish Kerry Cattle Society to establish a more formal network of breeders in the US. The following will outline a plan that we hope will meet the needs of the breed and the breeders.

Census of Existing Kerry Cattle in the US

We are doing a head count of all live Kerry cattle, semen and embryos in the US. This will include all registered and pure unregistered stock in the US. Of specific interest is

the identification of single Kerry cattle in collections that non-profits sold in the last 10 years.

Collection of Embryos and Semen from the different families of cattle in the US

It is very difficult to find a replacement bull. Kerry cattle do not traditionally take well to semen, but it was decided that in order to insure that we don't lose anymore genetics, we should collect all available bulls. Two locations have been identified that we can use to collect domestic supplies of semen for all breeders in the US.

Embryos will be collected from better cows in each cow family. It is ideal that they be bred to Irish semen and heifers from those breedings used to introduce new bloodlines into existing herds. Storage of embryos will also insure that no animals are lost due to natural disaster.

Population Control

With the help of ALBC, US breeders have talked to a number of breeders of other critical populations of livestock. Computer programs used to calculate inbreeding coefficients, relationships, mean kinships and suggested breedings were all investigated. The US breeders also wanted to be able to use this data to consider animals in all populations, not just US animals.

SPARKS, a program developed for the management of captive zoo populations was of specific interest. Research shows that the use of such a program has to be the specific interest of the majority of the breeders to work. Cleveland Bay's appear to be the best example of the use of this program. Others only use the herd book component, which is not the interest of the breeders in the US or disbanded after internal conflicts prevented a cohesive effort to conserve the breed. There are free-ware programs developed by breeders of rare dogs that are available and freely handed out to rare population groups.

Ireland appears to have developed a system called the MRELS. Is "a computer based system for the computation of inbreeding and relationship between potential mates in the breeding population." Only 3 of the 64 volumes are on computer. How the US breeders use this system or obtaining data in this system for US use is of interest. Many of the other population control programs appear to handle SAS or Excel formats and can be transferred. US breeders are VERY interested in developing a relationship with the Irish committee in charge of this system.

US breeders are also interested in obtaining the joint technical advise of Dr's Philip Spoenberg and Dr. P. Leo Curran in developing a population control system.

Marketing

A number of breeders of Kerry Cattle in the US use the milk for the production of cheese or bottled milk. It is of specific interest to encourage new breeders that will use the milking qualities of the Kerry Cattle for the production of high-end dairy products, rather than for the production of lawn ornaments.

A by-product of the dairy industry is beef. With increasing numbers of animals, a marketing program that takes into account the ability of Kerry cattle to finish high quality beef on grass is of specific interest.

Funds

The US breeders have a unique opportunity to tap into Irish American sentiments towards anything Irish or Celtic. There is a real opportunity to raise funds for a multi-country effort to conserve the Kerry cattle. Phase one will be to use ALBC or a similar non-profit as a fiscal sponsor while breeders develop a more formal network of breeders. Funds raised will be for an Association that promotes the interests of US breeders, the Kerry breed and furthering the plans outlined by the Irish Kerry Cattle Society.

Meeting

It is proposed that up to four representatives of the Irish Kerry Cattle Society, Royal Dublin Society, Irish Cattle Breeding Federation or whom ever the Irish Society deems most appropriate come to a meeting on November XX at the ALBC Annual Meeting. American breeders will meet with and discuss the future conservation efforts in the US.