Interest in the Jersey cow is growing among Rwandan dairy farmers, and the Rwanda Jersey Farmers and Breeders Association (RWAJEFBA) is working to make sure the animals, the genetics and the markets are there to match it.

Jersey cattle have been part of Rwanda's cattle farming for decades, but their value is receiving renewed attention as farmers increasingly recognise the benefits of a breed well suited to local farming.

Although relatively few Jersey cattle were present in Rwanda before the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, some were kept by farmers, others at government research stations. As the country rebuilt its agricultural sector after, efforts to revive livestock production created renewed opportunities for the breed. Government initiatives and international organisations encouraged farmers to adopt Jersey cattle, both through the importation of live animals and artificial insemination using Jersey genetics.

Ntare Cosmas, Chairman of the Rwanda Jersey Farmers and Breeders Association (RWAJEFBA)

Heifer International Rwanda was among the organisations that helped farmers access Jersey cattle. Meanwhile, cooperation with the Royal Jersey Agricultural and Horticultural Society expanded access to Jersey semen and strengthened artificial insemination services.

As dairy farming developed, however, many farmers shifted their attention towards breeds and crossbreeds perceived to produce more milk. Jersey cattle, which are smaller than some other dairy breeds, were sometimes considered less valuable, like potential sale price of male cattle.

This preference led some farmers to abandon Jerseys without fully appreciating their advantages, including efficient feed conversion, lower feed requirements and adaptability.

Today, interest in the breed is growing again as farmers reconsider what makes a dairy cow productive and profitable under smallholder conditions.

Ntare Cosmas, Chairman of the Rwanda Jersey Farmers and Breeders Association (RWAJEFBA), says the renewed interest is evident at agricultural exhibitions and

farmers’ events, where people regularly ask where they can obtain Jersey cattle.

“We have farmers who come to us asking where they can get Jersey cattle, but sometimes we do not have the animals to give them,” Ntare said.

Organising farmers and improving the Herd

Initiated in 2024, RWAJEFBA adopted its first statutes the following year and now has 79 members across 10 districts, with membership continuing to grow. Members come from Gasabo, Rulindo, Gicumbi, Nyagatare, Gatsibo, Kayonza, Ngoma, Rwamagana, Bugesera and Nyanza districts.

The association seeks to bring Jersey farmers together to promote good farming practices, improve breeding and genetics, strengthen animal management and expand market opportunities.

A key priority is genetic improvement through better identification and traceability. The association aims to establish a
national Jersey herdbook documenting animals, their parentage, sires and production performance. Such records can help farmers make informed breeding decisions, monitor the quality of their herds and build a stronger foundation for long-term improvement.

“We need to know which animal comes from which parent, its production and its performance,” Ntare said. “That is how we improve the breed.”

Beyond genetics, RWAJEFBA aims to strengthen farmers’ knowledge and cooperation, helping them manage their cattle more effectively and improve the productivity and profitability of their dairy enterprises.

Why Jersey?

The value of Jersey cattle lies not simply in the volume of milk they produce, but in how efficiently they convert available feed resources into milk and other benefits for the farm. Jerseys are specialised dairy cattle known for producing quality milk rich in butterfat and protein. This composition makes their milk particularly valuable for dairy processing.

Their relatively small body size is another advantage, especially in Rwanda, where many farmers have limited land for keeping cattle and producing fodder. Compared

with some larger dairy breeds, Jerseys generally require less feed and housing space. Their efficient feed conversion can help smallholder farmers obtain good milk production from the resources available to them.

“Jersey may not always rank highest in litres of milk, but when you consider the resources available to a smallholder farmer, it is a very appropriate cow,” Ntare said.

The breed is also valued for its hardiness, adaptability and reproductive performance. Jerseys are generally more heat-tolerant than many other European dairy breeds, while their disease resistance can be an advantage under appropriate management.

Their relatively early maturity and good fertility can also help farmers establish productive herds sooner, provided the animals receive adequate nutrition and veterinary care.

“Jersey are hardy cattle that are not threatened by changing climatic conditions like many other breeds,” Ntare observes.

For farmers working with limited resources, these characteristics can make Jersey cattle a practical option. Rather than judging a cow primarily by its size, but consider feed costs, milk composition, reproductive performance, animal health and the overall returns from the herd.

The association also wants milk quality to receive greater recognition in the market. Ntare argues that better consideration of milk composition would encourage farmers to invest in suitable breeds, improved feeding and better animal management.

Collaboration to Strengthen Jersey Farming

RWAJEFBA’s work is supported by Jersey Overseas Aid through the Royal Jersey Agricultural and Horticultural Society (RJAHS). The Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board (RAB) has also supported the association’s institutional development, including the preparation of a strategic plan and procedures manuals.

The wider collaboration builds on the RJAHS’s longstanding engagement with Rwanda. Following the relationship initiated by President Paul Kagame’s visit to

Jersey Island in 2004, the Society supplied Jersey semen for crossbreeding between 2005 and 2012 and trained more than 370 artificial insemination technicians.

However, access to appropriate breeding material remains a challenge. Some farmers struggle to obtain semen when needed because of infrastructure limitations, including inadequate access to liquid nitrogen for preserving it. For RWAJEFBA, improving access to quality breeding must be accompanied by stronger record-keeping and traceability systems. The association also wants to help farmers improve husbandry practices and address the high cost of dairy production.

Together, these efforts aim to expand the availability of suitable Jersey cattle, improve genetic quality and help farmers benefit more consistently from dairy farming.

A Farmer Experience

For Uwera Flora, a farmer from Rukomo Sector in Gicumbi District, the advantages of Jersey cattle became clear through years of experience.

She obtained her first Jersey cow from Heifer International Rwanda around 2003. Over time, she expanded her herd, sold many animals and she still keeps at least seven today.

“When I got the Jersey, I realised that it did not eat much but produced a lot of milk,” she said.

Uwera has strengthened her farming skills through training in cattle feeding, milk hygiene, animal management and fodder production. She now grows fodder, including alfalfa and Desmodium, and shares her knowledge with other farmers through groups she helped establish.

The benefits extend beyond milk sales. Manure from her cattle supports crop production, while surplus farm produce provides another source of income. After her husband died, income from livestock helped her raise their 15 children, meet healthcare expenses, acquire land and improve her home.

Her experience illustrates why the value of a dairy cow cannot be measured by size or milk volume alone. For a smallholder farmer, a suitable breed can support both livestock and crop production, strengthen household income and provide a more

sustainable foundation for family livelihoods.

As RWAJEFBA works to improve breeding, traceability and farming practices, experiences such as Uwera’s offer a practical reminder of the potential Jersey cattle hold for Rwanda’s smallholder dairy sector.

