Southeast Dairy Producer's Check-Off Program

Research Summary

In-depth genomic analysis of fertility indicators in Holstein dairy cattle

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Implications

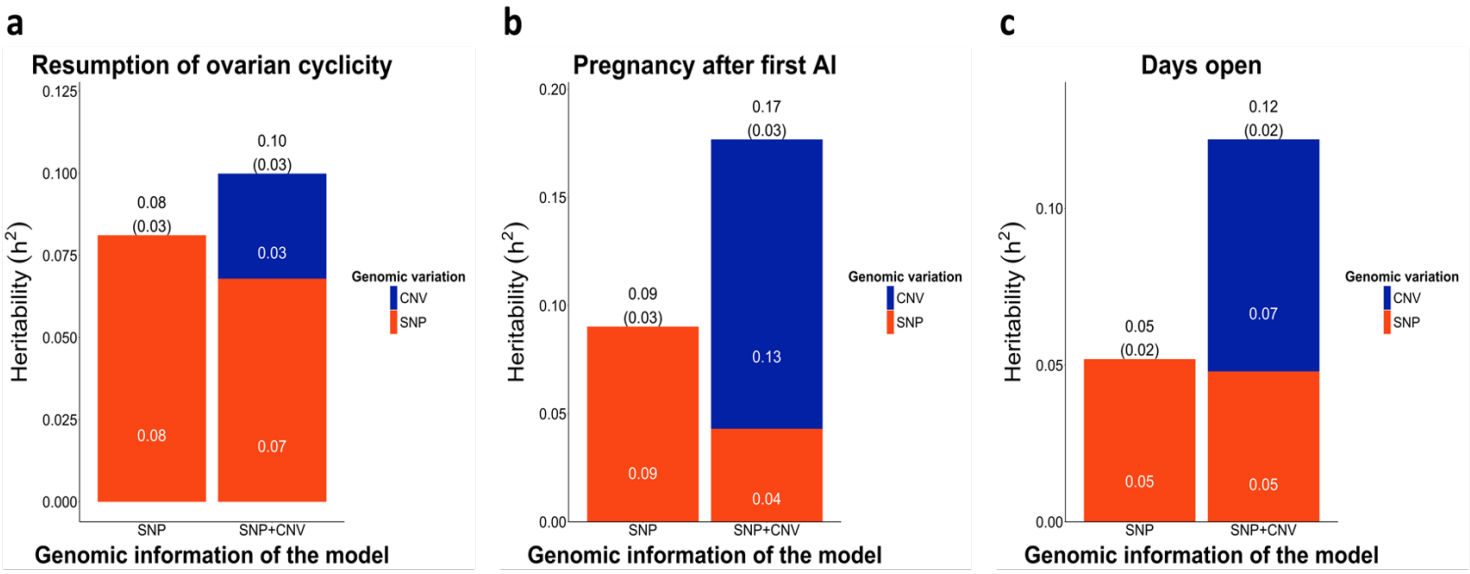
The incorporation of copy number variations (CNVs) in traditional GBLUP analysis enhanced heritability estimates for fertility traits in dairy cattle. Hence, it is expected that higher heritability estimates lead to better prediction accuracy of genetic merit, boosting genetic trends over the years.

Methods

Resumption of ovarian cyclicity (CYC), pregnancy after first AI (P1stAI), and days open (DOPN) of 11,489 Holstein cows from 16 herds located in 7 U.S. states (OH, MN, NY, WI, CA, FL, and TX) were recorded using a well-defined and standardized phenotyping protocol. Resumption of ovarian cyclicity was assessed via transrectal ultrasonography at 40 ±3 and 54 ±3 DIM with portable ultrasounds and recorded as a binary trait (0 = anovulation, 1 = ovulation), where ovulation was defined as visible corpus luteum on both consecutive ultrasound scans. Pregnancy after first AI was diagnosed by ultrasonography on day 32±3 after AI and reconfirmed at day 60±3 of gestation, also recorded as a binary trait (0 = no, 1 = yes). Days open was defined as the DIM when the cow became pregnant within 305 DIM. For cows that did not become pregnant within 305 DIM, days open were censored when the cow left the herd, died, became "do not breed" or when they completed 305 DIM, whichever came first. Out of the nearly 12,000 cows, a total of 3,387 Holstein cows have high-density genomic (777,962 SNPs) information. Besides SNPs, 4,113 non-redundant copy number variations (CNVs) were mapped using genomic information of all genotyped cows to assess the contribution of an alternative genomic variant on fertility indicators of a U.S. representative population of Holstein dairy cows. Traditional SNP-based and alternative SNP+CNV-based models were fitted to in-depth investigate additive genetic variability underlying fertility indicators in Holstein cows. All mapped CNVs were used to build the CNV-derived genomic relationship matrix (CNV_GRM). CNV loci representing deletions showed double deletions, single deletions, and normal states were recoded as 0, 1, and 2, respectively. In contrast, CNV loci representing duplications showed normal state, single duplications, and double duplications were recoded as 0, 1, and 2. Given some CNVs loci presented deletions and duplications, these mixed-CNVs were treated as two distinct CNVs loci, one representing deletions and the other representing duplications. The variance components and heritabilities estimates for CYC, P1stAI, and DOPN were obtained by fitting either only a SNP-derived GRM (SNP_GRM) or jointly SNP_GRM and CNV_GRM in models including the female category and farm-year-season as fixed effects.

Results

The SNP-based model estimated additive genetic variances of 0.09 ± 0.03 (CYC), 0.10 ± 0.03 (P1stAI), and 305.40 ± 120.94 (DOPN), with heritabilities of 0.08 ± 0.03 (CYC), 0.09 ± 0.03 (P1stAI), and 0.05 ± 0.02 (DOPN). The SNP+CNV model showed complementary additive genetic variances of 0.03 ± 0.02 (CYC), 0.16 ± 0.03 (P1stAI), and 433.39 ± 94.56 (DOPN), leading to higher heritabilities of 0.10 ± 0.03 (CYC), 0.17 ± 0.03 (P1stAI), and 0.12 ± 0.02 (DOPN). These heritability estimates from the SNP+CNV model were 23% (CYC), 95% (P1stAI), and 134% (DOPN) higher than those from the SNP-based model. Therefore, CNVs account for additive genetic variance of fertility traits which cannot be accounted for only by SNPs as genetic markers.



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Discovery of genes causing thermotolerance

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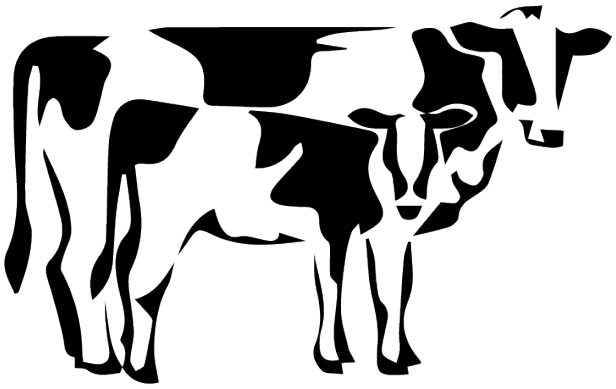
Implications

Mutations in HELB are not responsible for the increased resistance of cells to elevated temperature in the Brahman breed. Work is continuing to identifygenes in cattle that confer resistance to heat stress.



Methods

Brahman embryos are more resistant to the negative effects of elevated temperature than are Holstein or Angus embryos. If we could identify the genes responsible for this difference, they could be transferred into Holstein to increase fertility during heat stress. HELB may a role in resistance of cells to heat stress since it is involved in stabilizing DNA. Moreover, there is a mutation in HELB in Brahman cattle that does not exist in Bos taurus breeds. Our goal was to use gene editing to modify the Holstein HELB gene into the Brahman version and determine whether the resultant cells were increased in resistance to heat stress.

Results

The first experiment performed was to sequence the HELB gene in Bos indicus (Brahman) and Bos taurus (Holstein) and verify that there is a mutation inthe Brahman version of the gene. This experiment was completed and we were able to confirm that there is a mutation in the Brahman HELB gene. In the second experiment, we measured mRNA for HELB in embryos to see if the gene is turned on in the early embryo. Results indicated that the gene was not active and therefore is not responsible for the increased resistance of Brahman embryos to elevated temperature.