



Keep fat in its place

When corn is cheap and cattle are high, it's no surprise that some are fed too long. Fatter cattle are inefficient, but feeders let some get too fat while the whole group adds more pounds of beef for sale. It seems like the right thing to do at the time.

Long term, it could be a mistake. At least, we should look for ways to improve uniformity so that feeding for optimum weight doesn't make as many cattle too fat.

Consumers don't want fat, except for the intramuscular marbling fat that adds flavor. External fat trim can amount to 150 pounds or more in a too-fat carcass. Industrial uses push fat value above a nickel a pound, so it is not quite worthless, but cost of gain may be 10 times that, even with cheap corn.

USDA developed the Yield Grade (YG) system in 1976 to quantify cutability, or retail yield of boneless beef from each carcass. A numerical range runs from the leanest score of YG 1 to the fattest, YG 5, and value-based markets usually begin discounting at YG 4.

A carcass that would have been worth \$1.20 per pound as YG 3, may drop to \$1 per pound when fed even a day too long, crossing the threshold to YG 4 discounts.

The first National Beef Quality Audit, 14 years ago, put the value of lost opportunity from too much waste fat at \$190 per head. That was based on an alternative of "zero trim," and may have overstated the problem. Yet, the share of YG 4 and 5 cattle in the mix since then has increased to 7% last year, a 20-year high. So, it's fair to say we are still leaving a lot of dollars

on the table. To put them in our pockets, we must coordinate marketing, management and genetics.

Uniformity in genetics will help feeders hit the target, just under the YG 3 level. When you buy bulls, pay attention to carcass traits. Don't vary them too much so that one set of calves has much more back fat or less muscling than the next. Maintain a relatively short breeding period so that your calves can be fed as a group with only one or two sorts to market.

Of course, you will keep production traits uppermost in mind, but that still allows for progress toward leaner, higher quality progeny. As you make improvements, retain ownership on a share of the calves to capture more of the added value.

Communicate genetics to the next segment whenever possible. Many feeding mistakes are made by trying to achieve higher quality grades than the genetics can deliver, or continuing to feed cattle after they have reached their potential.

As cattle are ready to leave your farm or ranch, sort them into uniform size groups. Encourage the feedlot to do the same, rather than sell them all at some average finish point. No calf is born with a destiny of being a YG 4; you may not be able to avoid overfeeding entirely, but sorting keeps it to a minimum.

Market pressures, including political and trade issues, control the short term. Many of these factors are outside of the beef industry, but they interact to create an illusion of greater value in YG 4 cattle. These forces can change very quickly, greatly reducing the market tolerance of excess fat.

Nobody should make genetic or management decisions for the short-term market. It makes no sense to plan on producing more YG 4 cattle. Nor should anyone assume the uptrend in YG 4 cattle is due to genetic emphasis on marbling.

Most breed organizations track cutability through expected progeny difference (EPD) for ribeye, percent retail product or YG. These breeding values are trending higher, but within individual herds, cutability can be more or less of a challenge.

If you ignored muscling or added external fat over the years, it is time to get back to balanced traits. That certainly doesn't mean backing away from marbling, because data correlations prove you can keep the taste while reducing the waste fat through genetic selection.

Remember why you produce cattle and you will act to shore up consumer demand for beef, working with all the other links in the production chain to reduce YG 4s while adding potential juiciness and flavor. Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll look at labor. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail cabsteve@aol.com.

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