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Calf nutrition pays

Quality beef starts with good calf nutrition from day one.

“Start early to give that calf the greatest chance he has to grade Choice, premium Choice or Prime, so he’ll qualify for premium branded beef programs,” says Mike Krakoviak, director of the Purina Mills, LLC, Cattle Business Group.

The company recently launched a program called, “Nutritional Marbling™,” which aims to increase beef’s taste fat through feeding, both on the ranch and in the feedyard. That starts by feeding corn, or starch, as early as possible, he says.

Ron Scott, Purina Mills beef research director, explains.

“If you provide glucose, or the precursor for marbling, then it can cause cells to differentiate into fat cells,” says Scott, who works out of the LongView Animal Nutrition Center in Gray Summit, Mo. “That can happen at any point in a calf’s life, but it is certainly more dramatic the younger they start out.”

Scientists have noted for years that the earlier you start feeding grain to cattle, the better they’ll marble, Scott says. “But now there’s sound data that tells us why. They know more about it at the satellite cell level, at the muscle fiber level.”

Research from the University of Illinois says early weaning improves marbling. Calves weaned at 177 days or earlier graded 93% premium Choice and Prime, while only 68% of their non-weaned counterparts (placed on feed at more than 210 days of age) reached those quality levels.

Such trials helped form the Purina Mills recommendations for optimal Nutritional Marbling.

“Our feeding program has a method to deliver starch to the cattle, without having some of the concerns relative to over-consumption of grain, causing bloat, acidosis and founder,” says Scott, describing the company’s intake-modifying feeds. “It’s a way to maximize lifetime intake of corn safely.”

In an effort to prove program benefits to producers, Purina Mills is offering a feeding trial to some customers in Nebraska and South Dakota. The “Carcass Classics” will group calves with known genetics and similar management.

“We cannot change the animal’s genetic potential,” says Krakoviak. “All we can do is give him every opportunity to express it.”

All cattle will be fed similarly with one of 10 quality-oriented feedlots. The company will work with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) to get performance and individual carcass data back to each producer.

Krakoviak says it’s designed to show producers the value of specific management strategies.

“We want our producers to be as profitable as they possibly can,” he says. That starts by keeping the cattle healthy, getting them on a good nutritional plane and lowering stress.

“By the time most calves gets into the finishing yard, feeding programs can only affect the Choice grading percentage by maybe 5 points,” Krakoviak says. “We can multiply that if we start earlier. In turn, if we multiple that times the number of cattle fed in this country, it’s a billion-dollar deal for the industry, just on the producer side.”

The reach extends beyond cattlemen’s lost premiums, however.

“With the limited supply of Choice beef retailers have to work with, it’s even a bigger deal for them,” he says. Everyone has a stake in increasing quality grade.

“If the beef industry continues to be very viable in the United States, it’s good for cattlemen and it’s good for our economy,” Krakoviak says.

The Carcass Classic projects will bring that point home to ranchers as a demonstration that shows the means and incentives for hitting the highest quality standards.

For more information on the Carcass Classics, contact Field Manger Ron Bauer at (402) 376-2780 or ron_bauer@purinamills.com.

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