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NEWS

February 13, 2008

Executive Office

206 Riffel Rd.

Wooster, OH

44691-8588

Phone: 330/345-2333

Fax: 330/345-0808



Manhattan Office

1107 Hylton Heights Rd.

Manhattan, KS

66502-2822

Phone: 785/539-0123

Fax: 785/539-2883

Japan Office

Japan Business Center

WBG Marive East 14F

Nakase 2-6 Mihama-ku

Chiba-shi, Chiba 261-7114

Japan

Ph.: 011/81-43-297-3363

Fax: 011/81-43-297-3374

www.

certifiedangusbeef

.com

Contact:

Chelsea Good, CAB Industry Information Division

(785) 539-0123, CGood@certifiedangusbeef.com

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Stockers can be managed for quality

Cheap gains and maintenance-level nutrition are strategies from a bygone era of stocker management, according to Mark McCully, of Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB). The supply development director spoke Feb. 12 at the Mid-South Stocker Conference in Lebanon, Tenn.

“Research today is showing us that stocker operators play a critical role in determining beef quality, and ultimately consumer acceptance of our products,” McCully said. High-quality beef brands drive a need for coordinated focus from the cow-calf through feedlot stages, he added.

“Escalating corn prices and feedlot costs of gain point to longer stocker and grower phases to shorten that time in the finishing yard,” McCully said. “That means great responsibility but also a great opportunity for stocker operators who can provide value-added yearlings that fit the new quality-focused marketplace.”

USDA quality grades offer premiums, not only in the Choice-Select spread but also between Choice and CAB-qualifying cattle. According to the National Beef Quality Audit, there is a \$27 per head lost opportunity because the industry falls short of the ideal quality mix.

“This quantifies the value of quality,” McCully said, while noting that the industry has been slow to respond. “The limitation to CAB program growth has been supply, and insufficient marbling is the most common failing in evaluated cattle.”

Referencing research, he said marbling can be improved through a combination of genetics and management. That’s where stockers come in.

“The key window to determine later marbling occurs near weaning time, before the feedlot,” McCully said. “Many cattle are in the stocker phase during that window, and stocker management establishes whether they live up to their genetic marbling potential.”

Health, including parasite control, is a key factor. Deworming significantly improves carcass merit. General health is extremely important because quality grade decreases when treatments are required.

Growing systems and supplemental nutrition also come to play.

“It’s imperative to avoid periods of no gain, especially early in the stocker phase,” McCully said. The best target to support quality potential is a daily gain of more than 2 pounds (lb.) a day in the stocker phase, he adds.

Finally, stocker operators must consider the effect of growth implant strategy on quality. McCully recommended delaying the implant when cattle are adapting to the stocker program, and avoiding aggressive implants entirely.

Recognizing the importance of growth, McCully noted that Angus genetics have made great strides in the last 15 years. However, that advantage evaporates if management doesn’t recognize the potential.

“Many of today’s high-growth Angus genetics need to be managed differently to maximize value,” he said. “By following these recommendations on health, growing systems and implants, stocker operators will enable cattle to reach their full potential.”

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