



## *Are we there yet?*

*By Miranda Reiman*

We were bringing a little preschool friend out to our house for the afternoon. She was a town kid and about every three miles, she'd ask, "Are we ALMOST there?"

Turns out 12 miles is a really long way when there's the anticipation of a playdate.

But I get it.

I like that sense of accomplishment when I've "made it." I'm a list maker and nothing feels better than putting a line through completed items.

I understand why it's tempting for cattlemen to ask, "Do we have enough quality? Can we start selecting for something else?"

Not yet, says the data.

Let's take just take the Prime grade for example. For the last decade, the average annual spread between Select and Prime ranged from \$25 to \$50/cwt., averaging \$35 for 2016—all while cattlemen produced more of it.

During the last half of that period, weekly Prime production on a carcass-weight basis rose 8.9 million pounds, from 13.7 million pounds per week in 2012 to 22.6 million in 2016.

While working on an article about the whole category of Prime, I talked with producers, packers and distributors.

The cattlemen knew they could make more money by aiming for that highest target, while those in the direct business of keeping beef customers happy said the same. The more of that beef they have to sell, the better.

"I don't see a time in my lifetime when Prime's not a big premium. I just don't see it," a packer told me, as his cohort added, "that's the highest demanded product we see."

Typically, most of the Prime premium has been driven by the rib and loin "middle meats," but new foodservice trends are starting to grow the value on end meats as well. Ethnic dishes and "small plates" often make use of lower-priced chuck and round cuts, and restaurateurs have found that quality matters even then, or rather, especially then.

Overseas export customers are also demanding the highest grading U.S. corn-fed beef.  
All signs point to a growing demand.

If you want to supply it, the most focused way to get more Prime is to select for more marbling. Research shows you can do that without negatively affecting other production traits, and doing so will improve your bottom line.

If you're making your own list, I suggest you set a lofty goal. When you reach that, try to best your personal best.

Just imagine how satisfying it'll be to cross that off...only to set the bar even higher.

Next time in *Black Ink*<sup>®</sup> Steve Suther will help you consider starting a cowherd. Questions?  
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