

Adjust sights for aim on quality

When it comes to fat cover, what is the best target?

DROVERS/CERTIFIED ANGUS BEEF, LLC—BEEF QUALITY CONNECTION

Posted: May 31, 2006

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Cattle feeders who target high quality beef markets know that plenty of factors influence when cattle become market-ready. Genetics, age and days on feed are key elements. Cattle feeders seeking quality-based premiums have to consider all of these influences as they manage cattle to a most desirable compositional endpoint.

Of course, not all cattle within a given pen will reach that endpoint at the same time. That's why grid market-savvy cattle feeders sort to sell, marketing groups of cattle when they can earn premiums for superior carcass merit, but avoid potential discounts for too-heavy carcasses or excessive yield grade. To do that consistently, cattle feeders have to understand the relationship between fat cover (backfat) and intramuscular fat (marbling). Whether through application of ultrasound technology or visual appraisal, the ability to determine when cattle achieve optimum fat cover is important. Too much is not good, but neither is too little.

Iowa cattle feeder David Trowbridge says cattle are far more likely to carry too much fat cover these days. Overfeeding is an industry-wide problem, he says, because cattle feeders are pushing cattle to maximum possible weights. Packers have provided the incentive by easing the discounts for heavyweight carcasses and Yield Grade 4s.

"The industry isn't doing itself any favor for the long run," warns Trowbridge. "It's putting more pounds on the market, but less quality."

As manager of Gregory Feedlots, located near Tabor, Trowbridge has stuck by his guns, striving for timely marketing. As a result, close to 80 percent of the cattle achieve Choice or Prime quality grade and over 20 percent qualify for Certified Angus Beef. On both counts, that's way above the industry average.

"We sort cattle into marketing groups, trying to market them at .4 inch of fat cover," explains Trowbridge. "I think you have to set your target and stick to it. If cattle reach .4 inch but only weight 1,000 pounds, then we sell them at 1,000 pounds. They are ready."

Larry Corah, vice president of Certified Angus Beef Supply Development Division agrees. He fears sorting for the market has become a lost art in some large feedlots. Corah predicts increased grid-marketing and a need for skill and sorting cattle to achieve more consistent outcomes.

“We probably haven’t talked enough about fat cover variation that exists in a typical pen of cattle. Just as with age and weight, the variation can be huge, ranging from less than .4 up to .8, .9 or even an inch of fat cover,” offers Corah.

“Cattle marketed with less than .4 inch of fat cover show a tremendous reduction in quality grade. Go past .6 inch and you have a higher percentage of Choice and Prime, but also a big increase in Yield Grade 4 and 5 carcasses. And the discounts for those usually offset the premiums picked up for quality grade,” he adds. “Cattle feeders that can make the most of a quality-based grid know how to market cattle at the appropriate endpoint.”

However, Corah says cattle feeders who judge .4 inch of fat cover as most appropriate may want to consider adjusting their aim. The following table is based on data from over 140,000 of cattle fed and marketed through Certified Angus Beef licensed feedlots. It illustrates the impact of small changes in fat cover.

Fat Cover	.1	.2	.3	.4	.5	.6	.7
.8							
.9							
Marbling Score	368	392	409	430	450	460	470
478							
477							
% Choice and Prime	28.3	42.4	50.4	60.1	69.2	73.6	75.4
79.8							
79.6							
CAB® Acceptance Rate, %	2.2	4.5	9	13.2	17.7	22	21.4
17.4							
12.7							
Yield Grade, % 4 and 5's	.7	.2	.3	.7	2	5.6	18.8
35.2							
56.1							

As fat cover increases from .4 to .5 inch, note the more than 4% increase in marbling score, a 15% increase in the percentage of Choice and Prime carcasses and the 34% increase in Certified Angus Beef acceptance. The percentage of Yield Grade 4 and 5 carcasses increases too, but not so much as when fat cover exceeds .6 inch. According to Corah, the data shows how important it is to sort cattle for marketing at the best possible compositional endpoint.

“Ultrasound is a great tool for sorting, but so is the eye of the master,” states Corah. “Sorting visually or with the aid of technology, experienced cattle feeders are capable of sorting for a quality-based market. And .5 to .55 inch of fat cover looks like the ideal window.”