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A growing number of people in the beef cattle business today believe that the solution to reducing the amount of waste fat in beef is to lower the marbling requirements for the USDA Choice grade. Others would eliminate marbling entirely as a factor in beef quality grading.

Their ideas are based upon some fact. In an effort to push large numbers of cattle into the USDA Choice grade, feedlot operators are feeding many cattle beyond their genetically ideal finish point. The result is an abundance of waste outside fat and still not much marbling.

The solution, as articulated by one large feeder at the recent National Cattlemen's Association (NCA) convention, is to lower the marbling requirements for the USDA Choice grade so as to effectively include all or most of the USDA Select (Good) grade.

An article by a feedlot consultant in a recent issue of *BEEF* magazine went further. This man called for the elimination of USDA beef grading all

together. Barring that, he recommended a Canadian-style grading system that would not use marbling at all to determine quality.

These men, and those who buy into their thinking, overlook some very important points. The first is that the National Consumer Beef Study, which every responsible beef producer accepts as accurate, showed that marbling is an essential part of beef quality. It showed that consumers of all kinds prefer the taste of beef with a fair amount of marbling.

That's not surprising. Research going all the way back to the 1960s showed that fat provides the bulk of the taste in beef and other red meats.

But, the opponents argue, it is not possible to have naturally lean and well marbled beef. They are convinced that the two traits are antagonistic. It is not true, of course. Research at Kansas State University in the late 1960s and early 1970s showed that there is little relationship between marbling and outside fat in some cattle and breeds.

As Dell Allen reported at the time, marbling has little relationship to outside fat on a slaughter steer. The tests also showed that the relationship varies with breeds of cattle. The Kansas State research found that among the breeds tested, Angus cattle apparently have a genetic advantage for marbling, regardless of outside fat.

All breeds show marbling, the tests showed, but in some it takes more outside fat to provide it and possibly more time in the feedlot. And some cattle need to be fed to an older age to ensure marbling, the research found.

Certainly the beef cattle industry needs to reduce the amount of waste fat we produce. We can do it one of two ways. We can ignore consumer preferences and change grading standards to fit the majority of cattle that the beef cattle industry produces today. Or, we can change our cattle to meet the standards that we know consumers prefer. That will result in strong demand for our product. Angus cattle will play an important role in this second option.

As Angus breeders we have a big stake in the outcome of this controversy. Our best bet is to nip it in the bud.

When you hear calls for the reduction or elimination of marbling as a USDA grading factor expressed in your state or local cattlemen's groups, stand up and present the facts. It is a lot easier to brace a large stone at the top of a steep hill than it is to stop it once it has begun to roll dangerously down the slope.