

Beware of Meaningless Terms

The beef industry is guilty of using "buzz words" as a method of evaluating cattle. Many of these terms are meaningless or have different connotations for different people.

For example, a recent advertisement in a major breed publication recommended the use of a particular bull because the bull had "consistent



Bob Long

volume and thickness with tremendous fleshing ability." Such nonspecific terms may sound positive to some people but actually furnish no information whatever. Unfortunately, the use of such terms can become faddish and actually lead to changes in selection criteria; criteria which have nothing to do with beef production efficiency.

Included among such misleading terms are thickness, capacity, volume and easy fleshing. Currently these terms are widely used and so are worthy of examination.

THICKNESS — This term has received increased use as breeders finally awaken to the fact they are producing cattle with inadequate muscling. The obvious way to correct this would be to select for heavier muscling since it's a highly heritable trait. Instead, breeders and show ring judges look for and talk about more "thickness."

Overall thickness can be from muscle, from fat, or from a combination of these two tissues. Thickness and length of stifle, as well as thickness and bulge of forearm and gaskin, measures muscle since little fat is deposited at these points. However, thickness over the top or back results largely from fat, and unfortunately, many breeders and judges interpret thick, wide backs as muscling. This inaccurate evaluation has encouraged herdsmen to present cattle for both show and sale in "fatter" condition. The ridiculous result is genetics of the cattle is unchanged — only the feeding and management is different.

CAPACITY — Here is another widely used term which implies that deep bodied, deep flanked, big bellied cattle possess more feeding and breeding capacity and will, or already have, recorded superior performance. When, oh when, will cattlemen learn to look at performance records rather than at the cattle to determine growth rate and reproductive performance.

Overall depth of body includes a combination of loose hide and the fat deposited therein and is not a measure of the capacity of the digestive tract or that of the thoracic and abdominal cavities. Similarly, a big middle or paunch is not a measure of how much feed cattle can or will consume nor is it an indication of potential for growth rate. Big bellies can result from

light muscling (as in the case of dairy cattle) which allows the paunch to sag; from excessive fat deposits around the kidneys and on the intestines; or from "gut fill."

VOLUME — This meaningless term is confusing. Some cattlemen confuse it with capacity or how much cattle can eat. Others think of it as a measure of overall size. And a sizeable number of cattlemen use it simply because they believe it makes them sound well informed. Regardless, this term adds nothing to a set of performance data.

EASY FLESHING — Cattlemen usually use the word "flesh" to refer to fat, as in "the cattle are in good flesh." Therefore, an easy fleshing steer in the feedyard is undesirable while an easy fleshing cow on the range is desirable, unless she is in good flesh from having starved her calf for milk. It is also possible that a difference in degree of muscling can result in two individuals of identical fleshing being evaluated differently by the uninformed.

Therefore, use the term cautiously and only when comparing cattle of the same age, sex and treatment, and when intended for the same specific purpose.

When evaluating or describing cattle use accurate measures of productivity or excellence — "buzz words" are for "bull shippers."