

Lead In

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There is a move afoot in the beef industry to once again lower the marbling requirements for the USDA Choice grade. Fortunately, it doesn't have the backing of the majority yet. But that could change, particularly if the price spread between the Select and Choice grades widens, for any reason.

The proposal, articulated by at least one CEO of a major U.S. meat packer, is since there is no perceptible difference between the beef that falls into the bottom of the USDA Choice grade and the top of the USDA Select grade, that the top half of Select should be included in Choice. Consumers wouldn't know the difference, the reasoning goes, and fewer overfat cattle would be produced by people trying to get cattle to grade Choice.

Of course, the reasoning could have gone the other way. That is, since there is little difference between the top of Select and the bottom of Choice, the bottom third of Choice should be included in Select. This move would make Select a broader, more usable grade for retailers who want to market beef with very little marbling.

But, of course, this is not going to happen, because no matter how you cut it, Select is a lower quality, less tasty, less juicy and less valuable product.

For Angus breeders, the move to lower the grading standards for Choice would be a mixed blessing. On one hand, the downgrading of Choice would improve the market for Certified Angus Beef. As Choice became even broader and less dependable, retailers and restaurant owners would almost surely turn more to Certified Angus Beef for its dependable high quality and customer satisfaction.

But two negatives overshadow this positive. First, the move would decrease the need for Angus in the general cattle population. Lowering of marbling requirements for Choice by a full 50 percent of the Select grade would mean that many more cattle of other breeds could be fed more efficiently to Choice.

Second, pushing more low quality beef into Choice would mean more consumer dissatisfaction with beef as a whole. Part of the decline in beef demand can be attributed to the last downgrading of the Choice grade in the mid 1970s. It is almost assured that including half of Select into Choice would further depress the demand for beef.

These facts are recognized by many in the beef cattle industry. The National Cattlemen's Association Value Based Marketing Task Force studied the proposal and reported their findings in August. They emphasized that "...the majority of the Task Force felt that the risks associated with reducing the average quality level of the Choice grade were unacceptable." They reasoned that eliminating half of the Select grade would effectively kill it as a usable grade and said, "The results of the 1986 National Consumer Retail Beef Study support the conclusion that separate consumer markets exist for Choice and Select, and that beef marketing would suffer if these markets were forced to merge, with only one real product option remaining in the marketplace (i.e. Choice)."

Thus there seems little chance that a grade change will take place soon. But powerful forces are behind the proposed changes and if the beef market turns sour at some point, they could possibly garner enough support to bring about the change. In the meantime, we in the Angus business need to continue to gather carcass data on Angus cattle. We need to identify lines that produce high Choice and even Prime carcasses efficiently and with a minimum of waste fat.

Regardless of what is done or not done with USDA grading standards, no one is predicting a return to the days when edible beef tallow is a profitable product for cattle breeders to produce.

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