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In January 1998 the Nebraska Beef Council, Nebraska Cattlemen and University of Nebraska invited four California Beef Cattle Improvement Association (CBCIA) representatives responsible for putting together the *Your Beef's at Stake* program to attend their Beef 706 program in Lincoln, Neb. From that experience, the program was developed and implemented three months later.

With support from the California Beef Council, the University of California (UC) Cooperative Extension Service, the California Cattlemen's Association (CCA) and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and with the cooperation of many of California's agricultural colleges — Chico State; Fresno State; Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo (SLO); and UC Davis — the program emerged as a total beef industry educational venture.

■ **The program**

The two-day program offers an intense look at the beef industry. Beginning at 7:30 the first morning, approximately 30 people are assigned to six groups. Participants are assigned "Hank's Homework," for which they are given a scenario and assigned the task of deciding which marketing arrangement would bring them the highest return. They work on this assignment throughout the program.

Next, participants go through a live evaluation of market cattle, viewing six steers, one of which is usually a Holstein. They're given initial weights, final shrunk weights, average daily gains (ADGs) and number of days on feed. They're then asked to estimate, within their groups, the dressing percentage; carcass weight; backfat; ribeye area; percent kidney, pelvic and heart (KPH) fat; yield grade; marbling; maturity; and quality grade of the steer they have been assigned.

By midmorning participants

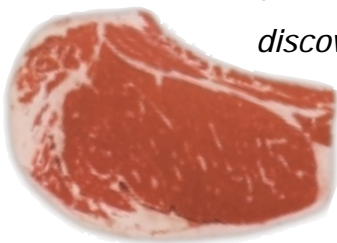
YOUR BEEF'S AT STAKE

Following in the footsteps of Texas' Beef 706 program (see the March 1999 Angus Journal, p. 234), "Your Beef's at Stake" is the first program of its kind to be offered in the western United States.

Participants evaluate live cattle, estimate their value, then discover their real value by fabricating the carcasses into wholesale, primal and subprimal cuts.

Producers and feeders also get the chance to do "Hank's Homework," analyze food safety,

see the slaughter process, and get the opportunity to meet and talk with experts from one end of the industry to the other.



BY ANDRA CAMPBELL

move to the meats lab, where they take a close look at safety procedures. Sessions on the slaughter process, the inspection process and microbial-testing procedures are shown in 30-minute segments.

Participants then get a lunch break and a chance to study their homework. After the break, topics such as selling on the grid, food safety, and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) are discussed, along with wholesale and retail cuts. Participants also witness a Warner-Bratzler shear-force demonstration.

Nighttime finds participants listening to a panel discussion with a restaurateur, purveyor and retailer to gain "our customer's point of view."

On the second day participants learn about grading carcasses for yield and quality. Then carcass fabrication begins. Participants, in their groups, find themselves in the cutting room with sharpened knives and bloodied aprons, continually asking, "Is this where I cut?"

After lunch a discussion on product development and the value of carcass byproducts is given. Such concepts as consumer trends in the beef industry are discussed, and a final wrap-up focuses on "Hank's Homework."

Participants head home in late afternoon with much to think about — including a good night's rest.

■ Why attend?

Your Beef's at Stake was formed to provide an educational program to assist California beef producers with improving the quality, consistency and consumer acceptance of their beef product. The objectives of the program are to:

— Demonstrate beef



Participants in *Your Beef's at Stake* find themselves in the cutting room with sharpened knives and bloodied aprons.

- processing from the live animal to carcass to primals;**
- **Review beef system economics from genetics to final retail product;**
- **Review beef safety concerns;**
- **Cover new-product development;**
- **Cover tracking and identification of product; and**
- **Cover retail and foodservice product marketing**

The first session of the program was held at Chico State in April 1998. The second session was held at Fresno State; the third, at UC Davis; the fourth, in July at Cal Poly SLO.

"We are in the process of picking up another college," says Hank Stone, past CBCIA president and the workforce behind the entire program. "At this time Cal Poly Pomona has expressed an interest in hosting a session." Stone says that would include all of the agricultural schools in California in *Your Beef's at Stake*.

"The hardest part is that we only have two people in each school who understand the concept," Stone says. "The program we attended in Nebraska has all the bells and whistles. They have wonderful facilities — things we can't even dream about."

Stone says they've had to involve people from outside of the universities, people from within the industry, to make the program work. "This is a strong point in our program," he contends. "We have been able to bring all of our institutions together, along with cattlemen and the beef council."

"The value of the program is that most people, especially in the West, haven't had the opportunity to work with packers. This program brings the message home that we are producers of beef, not producers of pounds," says Dave Daley, animal science professor at Chico State.

Randy Perry, Fresno State, agrees. "This is where we need to be," he says. "This program shows us what tools we need now in order to produce what we need to be producing." From the seedstock producer to the commercial cow-calf operator all the way to the consumer, programs like this are bringing home the message that all segments of the beef industry need to increase their communication.

Bruce Bervin, with the California Beef Council, says cattle producers — perhaps for the first time — are able to see the difference between a live animal and its carcass.

"Producers can equate back to the live animal and think about their own operation and breeding programs," says Bervin. "This program helps cattle producers see that we are in the beef business rather than just selling calves.

"Your Beef's at Stake

reinforces that we cannot visually appraise a live animal and accurately predict marbling and, therefore, its quality grade," explains Bervin. Technologies such as ultrasound are more accurate indicators, and putting research dollars into these areas is a good idea, he adds. "Your eyeball just isn't that good."

Also, the program shows producers how a relatively small percentage of the carcass is holding up the real value of the overall worth of the animal.

■ Different perspectives

John Isadore, senior vice president and general manager of the Beef Division at Harris Ranch, Coalinga, Calif., says the only drawback he sees is that they haven't been able to reach enough producers. "There just aren't enough facilities," Isadore says. "In a good year only 150 people will go through the program. We need to reach three times that amount."

Isadore, who has given a presentation on new-product development and the value of carcass byproducts at past sessions, says he sees a lot of seedstock producers, but not enough commercial cow-calf operators. "The value of the program is that it gives more people a perspective of what the end product is. If I didn't believe in the program, I wouldn't take the time to go give the presentations," Isadore says.

"There are a lot of commercial cattlemen who don't have a clue about carcasses," says Stan Sears, a commercial cow-calf operator in northern California who has attended the program. "Everybody is an expert before they pick a champion," he says, explaining that with programs such as *Your Beef's at Stake*, people should be able to better predict what is under the hide.

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"I am more accurate than I was before I went through programs like this at being able to predict backfat, yield grade and dressing percentage."

One of the greatest values of the program is learning the language. "If you know the language, you're on the front burner," Sears says.

"The value of the program is understanding the end product better," says Aaron Borrer of Tehama Angus Ranch near Gerber, Calif. "Assuming seedstock producers think that the end product matters, each one can decide where they want to head with their breeding programs."

Borrer says he would like to see more of his bull customers go through the program and has considered some special incentives for them to do so.

"This program can benefit any producer," says Borrer. "They are learning about what they are actually producing and

how it fits in the marketplace." He asks producers to look at the decline in consumption of beef. "Some producers have paid no attention to what they are producing; that's part of the problem."

Mark and Abbie Nelson of Five Star Land & Livestock, Wilton, Calif., have both been through the program. They believe it's a way to get a hands-on look at what their genetics produce.

"I highly recommend the program for every seedstock producer and commercial operator out there," says Mark. "How can we be in the business of producing bulls for the commercial operator when we don't understand the end product?"

Mark says that he learned to be more respectful of every part of the animal because, in a lot of cases, that is a big part of the profit. "We need to make sure brands are in the right place,

injections are given correctly and other management practices are used," Mark says. "The program has been a great way to see our checkoff dollars at work."

Abbie says she is more aware of carcass value and the end product after attending programs like *Your Beef's at Stake*. "We are going to focus on the genetics necessary to improve the end product, and our goal is to add these genetics into the commercial industry," she says.

■ The next step

What's the next step for *Your Beef's at Stake*? At the present time the plan is to continue with programs similar to the four that have been given.

"I think there has been enough demand to go through all of the universities for a second time," says Stone. The word keeps getting out, the programs are filled to capacity each time, and the funding is still there.

"It's very time-consuming for everybody involved, especially the professors, but I think they have enjoyed putting on the program," says Stone.

"I think we can keep the program like it is for several years and continue to add different concepts, like genetics and new technologies in the packing industry," says Daley. Or they could take it to the next step and make a graduate session. Maybe there will be enough interest to do both.

No matter what CBCIA and the California Beef Council decide, each additional session is one more step toward more people understanding the value of the end product — and that many more people working together in the beef industry.

