

PACKED WITH A PURPOSE

FRESH

With the turn of the leaves come thoughts of fall harvest. Not the kind set out in a cornfield under a harvest moon as the combine passes through row after row. No, this is the story of beef harvest; and it's an important one to tell.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

// **IT IS AMAZINGLY CLEAN FROM START TO FINISH, FROM THE TIME THEY ENTER THE PENS TO WHEN THEY GET BOXED UP.** — Kenny Hinkle



here is something beautiful about the intricate process of taking an animal from pasture to plate. It's one few get to see through cattle-colored glasses.

A large-scale meat packing plant of any kind needs to be more than just a well-oiled machine. A 1,400-pound (lb.) animal walks calmly into the plant and more than a hundred various sized packages of beef exit the other side. Scrutiny comes from every side, yet it is a driving force behind the continuously advancing process used to harvest beef.

After pouring their heart and soul into their animals, beef producers might worry a packer won't see the same value in maintaining high standards of care immediately prior to harvest.

"I think it is a huge benefit for producers to go through a packing plant," says Kenny Hinkle of Hinkle Prime Cut Angus in Nevada, Mo.

After traversing a packer's cat walk during the first Beef Leader's Institute (BLI), Hinkle decided he wanted to help build the bridge between packers and cattlemen.

"No matter what segment of the cattle industry we are in, pleasing the consumer is our end goal," Hinkle says. "Touring a packing plant might help producers better understand why people ask for certain things of their animals."

To do his part in creating a more collaborative beef production chain, Hinkle invited 28 of his bull buyers to tour a packing plant earlier this year. Much like Hinkle's first glimpse of "the other side," his buyers were impressed by the sheer magnitude of the modern-day packing plant.

"As cattlemen we all hear and read about the process," Hinkle says, describing the experience as mind-blowing. "But until you get on the harvest floor; see the number of people it takes and the precision with which they do their job, you don't fully understand it."

In total, Hinkle has toured three different packing plants.

"It is amazingly clean from start to finish, from the time they enter the pens to when they get boxed up," he says. "The sanitation standards are beyond what people would believe."

Continued on page 42



THE PENS

From the time cattle step off the truck, their every move is monitored by USDA inspectors.

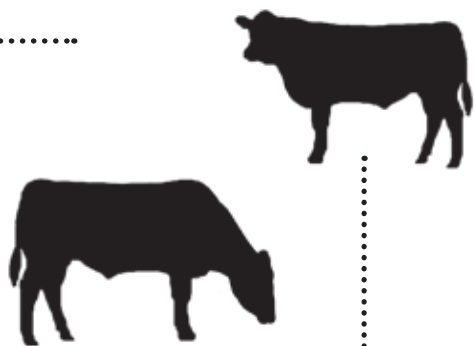
“While USDA inspectors are present during every step of the process, the plant teams go above and beyond USDA requirements with their training and standards,” says Clint Walenciak, director of packing for Certified Angus Beef LLC. “Packing plants invest a tremendous amount of training into their staff for the handling and management of the animals before, during and after harvest.”

With nothing but incentive to do things right, every segment of the supply chain does exactly that.

“The well-being of the animals in the holding pens plays into the quality of the end product,” Walenciak adds.

Fresh water and shade or sprinklers are both readily available in the typical holding pen at a packing plant. Since efficiency is a high priority for packers, things do move quickly.

“There is a lot of activity in those pens,” Hinkle remembers. “There isn’t a lot of noise from the people working those cattle though, you can tell



they have been trained to work them properly. I would say that is what I was most impressed by.”

Even the sanitation of the holding pens is evidently a high priority. Hinkle hypothesized they must be scraped after every load of cattle because that’s the only way they could be so clean.

Most plants don’t even let visitors anywhere near the holding pens — except on the catwalk — because they require specific training for anyone coming close to the cattle.

THE SPECIFICS

The process bearing the most intrigue is tracking a carcass through the plant. Added value, like qualifying for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, can’t happen until the grading process, and long after the ear tag is removed.

How do plants translate the value and carcass data back to the owners? The answer is actually simpler than expected.

“When we receive cattle, we assign them a lot number which is correlated to the pen they were fed in at the feedlot,” says Scott Pohlman, Cargill general manager in Friona, Texas. “The paperwork they are received with is entered into the plant computer. That allows the plant to track data for each individual animal.”

The real data magic begins after the animal is hooked to the trolley system, where their individual ID is recorded and paired with an EID tag, if present, so producers can see how their animals grade on the rail. This ensures each producer is properly paid for the value they add to their animal.

“At every point in the process where data is collected, it is entered into the plant’s computer system and tied back to the trolley,” Pohlman

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explains. “The trolley ID is linked to the individual carcass, which is tied back to the lot number.”

A primarily black-hided animal is the first step in hitting the CAB brand target. As the hide is removed, the exposed hocks are painted purple — or stamped with a purple “A” — if the animal’s hide is predominantly solid.

After internal organs are removed, the carcass is split in half and inspected; then it cools for 24 to 48 hours in what is called the hot box. This comes immediately after a sanitary shower.

THE GRADE

The grading sweet spot is in the ribeye muscle, between the 12th and 13th rib. Ribbing occurs at least 10 minutes before arriving at the grading station so the muscle has time to bloom.

“This exposure to oxygen allows the carcass to meet its full potential from a visual standpoint,” Walenciak says. The cherry-red color — a result of bloom time — allows the speckles of intramuscular fat to show up better on screen.

Part of the grading process is performed visually, while the other half is completed by a camera.

“From start to finish, it takes maybe 30 to 60 seconds to complete the trip across the grade stand,” Walenciak says. “The USDA grader is looking at a carcass for 10 to 15 seconds; that should give

producers an appreciation for how good they are.”

The USDA grader assigns the final quality and yield grade, often assisted by the measurements taken by the camera. As the carcass carousel continues, a stamp tells the story of each carcass: Prime, CAB, Choice, Select and beyond.

“A switchboard at the end of the grading stand instructs the trolley system where to take the carcass based on its final grades,” Walenciak says. “There is a rail exclusively for CAB carcasses, as well as other USDA programs and grades.”

Of the carcasses that don’t get the coveted G1 stamp denoting CAB, there are several other USDA programs for which they can qualify.

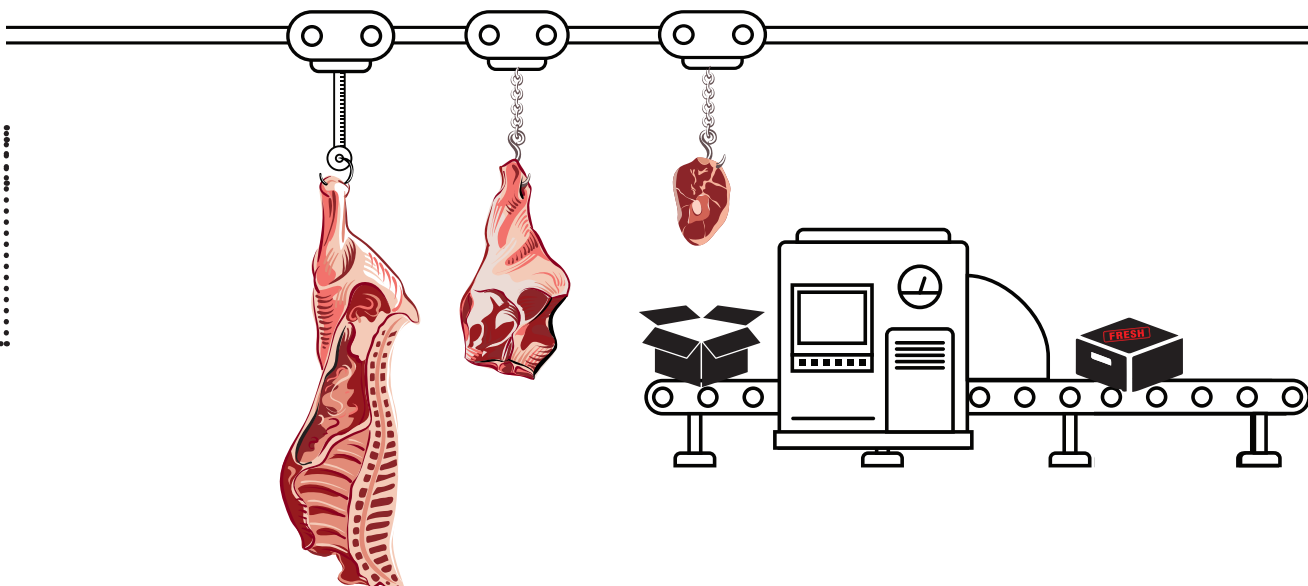
The way a packing plant keeps track of their animals isn’t much different than the way cattlemen do it out in the pasture. Think of the trolley system as the mama cow and the carcass is the calf linked directly to her.

THE PACKING

As soon as production ceases for the day, an entire team dedicated exclusively to cleaning gets to work on every area of the plant.

“They don’t start production again until they go through a pre-operation inspection, which is done by a USDA inspector,” Walenciak says.

Continued on page 44



The inspection process may look like a simple walk through the plant, but the stakes are high. A delay in production costs a packer money. No cut corner goes unnoticed when the backdrop is stainless steel and white cutting boards.

“Plants start each day with a production schedule to show how much they need to produce of each quality grade,” Walenciak says. “Generally, they start with the higher-quality products — usually Prime or CAB.”

The fabrication floor is efficiency and safety personified. Blades fly with the ultimate accuracy as they take primal cuts down to smaller slices of beef.

A three-minute gap between the first of one grade and the last of another keeps each meat category separate as cuts find their way to a box.

“The few minutes separating each grade is called a change over,” Walenciak says. “Sometimes they will use their break or meal times as a natural point for a change over rather than doing it on the fly.”

Even after several plant tours, Hinkle is amazed by the employees; how they all work in sync.

“I don’t think people understand that until they see a packing plant with their own eyes,” Hinkle says as he remembers taking his son on a tour. “I had told him all about it, but he had no comprehension of the size and magnitude of the operation until he saw it for himself.”

Hinkle says a packing plant is like most things in life: you don’t believe it until you see it.

SAFETY IS NUMBER ONE

“One aspect of the packing industry I am especially proud of is that food safety is a non-compete issue,” says Cargill’s Friona, Texas, General Manager Scott Pohlman. “Every year representatives from every beef processor gather at the Beef Industry Safety Summit to exchange ideas and best practices for ensuring food safety in the beef we produce.”

Safety of product and employee is at top of mind for each of the more than 800 USDA-inspected meat packing plants in the United States. These all contribute to the U.S. Meat Export Federation’s emphatic claim that the U.S. food supply is among the safest in the entire world.

“Our number one priority is the safety of our team members and the food we produce,” Pohlman says. “The safety of this industry has improved dramatically in our facility’s 51 years of operation.”

Among the employee-driven safety programs are personal protective equipment, behavior-based safety observation, lock-out programs and the use of ergonomics to enhance employee comfort and product consistency.

Safety and sanitation go hand-in-hand when it comes to a packing plant. Any tour always works its

way from fabrication to the harvest floor: from “clean to dirty.”

“The workforce in a plant is divided up into sections, that could be the fabrication side and the harvest side,” says Clint Walenciak, director of packing for Certified Angus Beef LLC. “Those employees would probably have their own breakrooms, lockers, even their own entry door into the plant.”

Each plant will have their own set up, but physically separating the cold from the hot processes will remain the same.

“Temperature control isn’t just for meat quality, it helps preserve it but it also plays a role in food safety,” Walenciak says.

Things don’t grow when it’s cold.

Carcass washes and antimicrobials keep the meat clean and safe, but so do the hot-water sanitizers between each cut during harvest and fabrication. Microbe testing is a never-ending process to ensure each safety measure is doing its job.

Both Walenciak and Pohlman agree that giving a plant tour is one of the many perks of their job in the meat packing industry.

“I love giving tours because people are always amazed by the complexity of the process as well as how clean, safe and orderly it is,” Pohlman says. “They usually always say it was nothing like they expected.”