

# Beef Logic

by Bob Long



## Eliminate USDA Grading? Ridiculous!

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) board of directors approved a resolution at its mid-year meeting calling for a "politically unbiased, science-based" study of the feasibility of privatizing the beef grading system. Privatizing simply means the elimination of USDA beef grading.

This writer is certainly not interested in big government, but historically the standardization branch of USDA has rendered a yeoman service to all agriculture by classifying its products. A consumer can purchase USDA Grade A large eggs without opening the carton and be confident of size and freshness; or a box of USDA Grade AA butter, knowing it will contain 16 ounces and be free of rancidity.

USDA beef grading is even more helpful. This dual grading system offers both a yield grade and a quality grade. The yield grade gives a close estimate of the percent yield of the edible portion of each carcass. The quality grade classifies the meat as to tenderness, juiciness and flavor.

Equally important is the fact that USDA graders have no conflict of interest and maintain uniform standards throughout the industry.

The current USDA grading system has two aults:

- 1. The quality standards for Choice are too low.** A few years ago (due to pressure from the same people now promoting the elimination of grading), the marbling requirement for the USDA Choice grade was reduced allowing beef of lesser quality to receive the Choice grade. This appeals to those who feed large numbers of cattle of Zebu breeding and plainer kinds from Mexico. However, it does not promote increased beef consumption.
- 2. USDA beef grading is not mandatory.** Most packers have the better carcasses USDA grade but the rest are "no rolled" and dumped indiscriminately into retail channels. The packer has every right to decline USDA grading but it should be an all or none situation.

Those supporting the elimination of government grading suggest the quality of beef be determined by each packer using brand names. The argument is that those brands which please customers will survive, thereby guaranteeing rigid quality specifications.

If there is a reader who believes the packer would not "stretch the specs" to fit current inventory this author has a bridge for sale in New York City.

For proof that consumers desire top quality beef, one has only to look at the unequalled success of the Certified Angus Beef Program. This branded beef program certifies only a portion of the Angus carcasses offered and strictly enforces a minimum requirement for marbling at the top of the Choice grade. This grade is assigned by a disinterested third party—a USDA grader.

Unfortunately, the beef industry has shown little improvement in carcasses during the past 20 years as evidenced by the last Beef Quality Audit. Years 1993 and 1994 saw the theme of every national and state

industry meeting devoted to the Beef Quality Audit — and rightly so.

Not surprisingly, this in-depth study revealed that beef carcasses averaged too fat, thinly muscled, deficient in marbling and lacking in uniformity.

These findings were particularly discouraging in that the very same problems were observed 20 years ago.

Why has there been no progress? Simply — few breeders have emphasized carcass traits in selection because they haven't been financially rewarded to do so.

Eliminate USDA grading? Certainly not! What is needed is a USDA grade for yield and quality on every carcass and payment to the seller on that basis. Valued based marketing is talked about. Why not just do it?

When, oh when, will the beef industry spend its time and money on improving quality, cutability and efficiency of production rather than on attempts to legislate an advantage for what happens to be in the pipeline? The technology is available now.

