

CAB to Enhance Uniformity

Brand to adopt ribeye and carcass weight standards.

by **Steve Suther**

Responding to beef industry changes and consumer demand, the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Board of Directors on Sept. 7 voted to adjust *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand specifications.

In place of a long-standing Yield Grade (YG) 3.9 limit, the brand will use a more specific consistency requirement in the future. Finished cattle weights have increased steadily and beef fabrication styles have evolved in the 28 years since CAB was founded. The changes will address uniformity issues that technology has been unable to control.

The Board voted to adopt a ribeye size bracket of 10 square inches (sq. in.) to 16 sq. in., and a carcass weight cap at less than 1,000 pounds (<1,000 lb.). It also instructed CAB staff members to investigate limits on external fat thickness to refine compositional consistency.

CAB staff will discuss the plans with its licensed packers, review existing research and conduct cutting tests before reporting to the Board with a final fat thickness recommendation.

Consistent ribeye

Since 1978, the average weight of a U.S. beef carcass has increased nearly 6 lb. per year, or 165 lb. total, while the initial YG 3.9 limit remained static.

“That limit helped control carcass weight, ribeye size and external fat,” said CAB President Jim Riemann. “It maintained a balance of those factors and allowed strength in one or two of those areas, but increasingly, outliers have set back our consistency goals.

“Yield grade is a cutability indicator for the packer, but it does not give us the product size and weight consistency our licensed retailers and restaurant operators need,” said Riemann, who worked several years in the packing industry and as a meat scientist before coming to CAB.

The brand’s 2005 consist study of 26,700 carcasses at plants in four states found calculated YG 3 carcasses with a ribeye range of 6.9 sq. in. to 19.0 sq. in., and carcass weights of up to 1,169 lb.

“It makes sense to limit ribeye range and to control cut weights, as it does to investigate an appropriate fat thickness,” Riemann said. “The idea is to achieve better control over consistency than yield grade currently offers.”

The 2005 National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA) found the top concern of foodservice and retail customers — insufficient marbling — already met by the CAB brand. “This change would take aim at the next two on that list: cut weights too heavy and lack of uniformity,” said John Stika, CAB vice president for business development. As carcass weights increased throughout the years, the static YG formula required ever-larger ribeyes.

For example, many 950-lb. carcasses with 14-in. ribeyes could not qualify for the brand under the YG specification — in some cases, CAB acceptance required a ribeye larger than 16 in. Ironically, that’s too large to fit CAB foodservice demand. Meanwhile, selection, management and marketing continue to

point toward larger cattle, and YG scores are already at a 20-year high.

The upper limit of <1,000 lb. is consistent with most value-based grids, Stika pointed out. What’s more, as a cutability guideline, the YG formula uses 15.8 in. as the base for that weight. That fits in the new specification window, he noted.



Eliminating outliers

Muscling in Angus cattle has kept pace with the trend to heavier weights, but further pressure there could only lead to still heavier weights and ribeyes.

“Adjusting our specification is a more appropriate way to address filling the box,” Stika said. “We will lose at least 6% of the cattle that currently qualify for the brand, but pick up others better-suited to the needs of our customers.”

Limits on fat thickness will serve to eliminate the problem outliers. Investigating those limits should address cutability concerns not met by today’s fabrication styles and the other newly refined CAB specifications, he said. One key challenge: “There is an inconsistent relationship between trim fat and the kernel fat that has been a problem across all YG classes for all brands,” Stika said.

“It will always be a challenge for cattle to meet the CAB marbling specifications, simply because the brand demands the best in Angus cattle,” said Larry Corah, CAB vice president for supply development and packing. “That’s good news for Angus producers who focus their selection, management and marketing on the CAB brand standards: Premiums should remain strong.”

These changes could add value to some YG 4s on the product side, but “YG 4 will not become a producer target,” Corah explained, “not with the feeding inefficiencies and a YG 4 discount

CAB® specifications

Premium, finer marbling to ensure great taste in every bite

1. Modest⁰⁰ or higher marbling
2. Medium to fine marbling texture

Youthful maturity for superior color, texture and firmness

3. “A” maturity (both lean and skeletal maturity)

Uniformity in cut size and yield

4. (Current) Optimum beef yield with Yield Grade 3 or leaner
4. (Proposed) Ribeye area 10 square inches (sq. in.) to 16 sq. in., carcass weight cap at <1,000 pounds and external fat limits
5. Moderately thick or thicker muscling

Safeguards for tenderness and quality appearance

6. No neck hump exceeding 2 in. in height
7. Practically free of capillary rupture in the ribeye
8. No dark cutters

at three times the value of a typical CAB premium.

“Angus producers will now have a ribeye target, rather than simply ‘bigger,’ and a logic for developing balanced growth and carcass genetic packages,” Corah added.

Brand leadership

Stika noted that CAB specifications have seen minor adjustments in the past, to better screen out dairy and *Bos indicus* genetic types, and to reflect changes in technology and fabrication practices (see Fig. 1). Just this summer the Board voted to adjust the

brand’s live specification to allow evaluation of all AngusSource® program calves, regardless of hide color.

The latest move ensures the brand’s leadership in providing foodservice and retail businesses with consistently superior beef, he said. CAB would be the first Angus brand to adopt a ribeye and carcass weight standard. Nearly three-quarters of Angus brands certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have no yield or uniformity specification.

“When the overall industry changes and production signals run counter to what

our customers want, it is incumbent upon us to act,” Riemann said. “We all know the consumer is the source of all new dollars in the beef industry.”

The brand’s executive team is expected to determine a backfat recommendation by mid-November, Riemann said. The Board will then approve a final form of the new specification and petition the USDA for the change. Riemann said CAB would work closely with USDA and licensed packers to ensure a smooth transition to using the new specifications at all licensed plants.



Fig. 1: CAB® fabrication changes in past 15 years

	1990	2005
Inside rounds sold ¼-in. trim or less	0%	88.0%
Short loins sold as 0" x 1" trim	0%	94.5%
Pounds of full loins sold	2 million	0
Rounds sold whole	33%	3%
Ribs sold as 107 or 109	68.0%	2.5%
Export ribs sold	32.0%	97.5%
Strips sold as 1" x 1" or fatter	100%	16.0%
Tenderloins sold fat-on	16.0%	0.0%