Give the People What They Want

How Ultrasound Helps Packers Put the Product on the Plate

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Everyone all along the beef production line – from seedstock producer to those who put the meat on the plate – will tell you their ultimate goal is pleasing the consumer. But what does that really mean?

"Our packers will tell you people want quality and they want flavor," says Dr. Larry Corah, of Certified Angus Beef® LLC's Supply Development Division. "Food has become a form of entertainment, a social event, and people want something good."

In the past few years, CAB has seen phenomenal growth in sales despite the economic recession by delivering what the consumer wants. Product sales from October 2009 through September 2010 topped 777 million pounds, a 17.2 percent increase over the previous year.

"People want the unique flavor of beef," says Corah, "and they want healthy food." The unique flavor of beef comes from marbling, an element greatly improved by the use of ultrasound. "It's a good fat – bad fat issue," he continues, "and people wanting lean beef are often confused by that. Because of its fatty acid profile, marbling has health benefits. It's the external fat cover that is not good to eat."

Corah credits the use of ultrasound, and the efforts of the CUP Lab® and Technology Center, with beef genetic improvement and the increased quality of, and demand for, CAB's product.

"We're not just in white linen tablecloth restaurants," says Corah. "Our Prime products are now sold in retail stores." Fifty-two percent of CAB's 2010 sales were retail sales.

Eating high-quality, highly marbled steak is no longer left for the special night out. "When economic times are uncertain, people give up things like eating out," explains Corah, "but they still want that positive eating experience – at home." So, enticed to the supermarket meat case by advertised low-end cuts, they will often "upgrade" when they see the higher quality offerings.

Providing a finished product of the quality and variety the consumer desires is the direct responsibility of the packer, and what matters most to the packer is a product that will sell, and is efficient to produce.

"We're looking for high quality and consistency," says Brian McFarlane, Senior Director of Technical Support for Operations at Tyson Fresh Meats, Inc. "One important step the industry can do to meet our needs is manage variation of carcass weight and rib eye size – and certainly, rib eye size in particular, can be measured with ultrasound."

Tyson is "a fabricator that sells everything but the moo and we're working on that," according to McFarlane, from about 7 million head of cattle a year, and he applauds any technology that helps producers make better breeding or business decisions that will help take the beef industry to the next level. "Certainly we can't directly attribute decades of change to any one thing," he says. "But as a non-evasive technology, ultrasound has no doubt played a part. It's a precise and accurate technology with better predictive capabilities than other technologies."

Dave Trowbridge, manager of Gregory Feedlot in southwest Iowa, markets beef to several processors, and he understands the need for quality and consistency. "Sooner or later every calf goes to market, and the processor doesn't want to deal with the Yield Grade 4s and 5s," says Trowbridge. "Ultrasound helps eliminate that situation. When you're a packer producing boxed beef, putting different cuts in different boxes, sorting by size is costly and time-consuming,"

Trowbridge sees technologies like ultrasound playing a major role in providing the desired end product.

"Cattle are getting better and better all the time," he says. "Seedstock producers are using ultrasound technology to change the genetic population of cattle. Yes, we play a part with feeding practices, etc., but you have to have the genetics to start with."

It's genetic improvement, particularly in quality grade, that drives CAB's success, according to Corah. "We've raised the bar and increased the consumer's expectations," he says.

"Genetic selection for quality grade has also been very beneficial to packers," says Corah. "The demand for quality is much greater than it was 10 years ago, and we're meeting that demand because the beef we're producing is much better. Quality sells, and the global market pays a premium for Prime and High-Choice beef."

For Mark Gardiner, of Gardiner Angus Ranch, a Qualified Seedstock Supplier member of U.S. Premium Beef, (USPB) it's all about the premium dollars, and how those dollars influence the quality of animals processed at USPB's packing company, National Beef®.

"We're delivering better cattle all the time because receiving premiums for Choice carcasses encourages us to select genetics and adjust management to deliver more cattle that will hit the target consumers have set," Gardiner says. "Producers have taken the individual carcass data they receive from USPB and used that information, along with technology such as ultrasound, to consistently improve the cattle they deliver. While the percent Choice has increased, the percentage of Yield Grade 4 carcasses has decreased from when USPB began operations in 1998. That should be expected from our industry if we're listening to what consumers tell us they want."

The grid pays for quality and yield grade because the packer, and the consumer, want a consistent, high-quality product. Trowbridge sees the consumer forces at work, even when the premium dollars aren't immediately there.

"The past couple years the Choice/Select spread has been small, and that's not always much incentive," he explains. "Yet, that's still what the packer wants. In reality, they are looking for cattle that grade." After all, they have the consumer to answer to.

Marbling for flavor, consistency for processing ease and sell-ability – with the use of ultrasound as a genetic selection tool, beef producers can tailor their stock to meet packer expectations and market demand for a quality product.

"We've seen significant improvement year after year," says Gardiner. "The economics of genetic selection has helped accelerate that. And in the end, the consumer is happier."