



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Quality Assurance Section

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Beef Quality Assurance for Marketed Cows and Bulls

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The retail competition among beef, swine, and poultry products is strong. Added to the mix is a consumer concern for the total amount of meat in their total diets. Further, there are lingering concerns among consumers about the safety of some meat products.

These concerns and perceptions need attention to assure the beef consumer that the industry is meeting the high standards of quality and safety. Researchers conceived the beef quality assurance idea as a way to enhance the image of beef in the consumer's mind.

Every producer must realize they are growing animals that are destined for human consumption. A healthy old cow is certain to become food when she is placed on the to-be-sold list. A bull has the same fate when he fails to meet the breeding demands of the owner.

Meat products from mature cows and bulls represent about 20 percent of total U.S. beef production. Contrary to the popular belief that they convert nearly all non-fed cattle to ground beef, packers save and sell 89 percent of the rounds and 40 percent of the top sirloin butts from non-fed cattle. Also, revenues from sales of cows and mature bulls may account for 30 percent of a producer's annual income.

Choices of marketed animals are based on the individual production capacity and/or utility in relation to overall producer goals and expected economic return. Given the importance to beef markets and individual producers, decisions on marketing cows and mature bulls can have an impact on both.

Quality Assurance for Animals Marketed When They Are Fully Mature

Beef quality assurance programs address several details that are important to the non-fed animal market including drug and chemical residue-avoidance, reduction of injection-site damage in back and rump muscles, reduction of tissue damage from bruises, and excessive

fat trim. Many quality deficits in mature cows and bulls such as advanced lameness, inadequate muscling in cows, heavy live-weights, and low dressing percentages in bulls are also considered here. See 200, "The Cattle Producer's Role in Beef Quality Assurance," for more recommendations on beef quality assurance goals.

Two extremes in carcass defects account for the greatest revenue losses and are the most frequent findings for the mature non-fed cattle presented at slaughter: too thin or too fat. Inadequate muscling, or low muscling scores, were found in 67 percent of cows and 15 percent of bulls at slaughter. Researchers detected excess external fat or too high carcass weights in 62 percent of bulls and 28 percent of cows at slaughter. Combined, these defects accounted for \$233 million in revenue lost to the beef industry from the uncorrected quality defects in non-fed cattle.

To help solve this area of quality inconsistencies, cattle producers are encouraged to consider various strategies for marketing their adult cattle. Prices for slaughter cows and bulls are traditionally lowest in October to December and highest in February to April. For thin, inadequately muscled cows, one marketing option is to develop a feeding plan that improves their body condition before selling.

Short team feeding plans range from 30 to 100 days. For thin cows detected in the fall, one suggestion is to feed a ration developed for maximum gain for 30 days and market animals in better condition and higher weight. Another option is to feed thin animals for minimum gain through the winter followed by a maximum gain ration and market them during the early spring when prices usually increase.

Of course, the economic returns from feeding cows depend on feed costs and price at selling, so there is some amount of risk to the producer choosing to raise value in their animals through holding and feeding.