

Getting Better

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Manage. Monitor. Market.”

That's the best advice Dan Hale gives producers eager to enhance the quality and value of culled cows and bulls they send to market. And results of the “2007 National Market Cow and Bull Beef Quality Audit” show that producers have roped many quality issues that have cost them money in the past.

Hale, Texas AgriLife Extension meats specialist at College Station, was part of the audit team that included specialists from seven different universities. They monitored 23 packing facilities nationwide and collected data from December 2006 to September 2007.

“There are 6-8 million cows sent to slaughter every year. They make up a very big portion of our industry,” he says, adding that cow meat accounts for dozens of different blends of ground beef, fast-food burgers and a host of specialty sandwiches. Jerky, big chunks of chicken-fried steaks and many other meat products also are derived from cows.

Two previous audits were conducted in 1994 and 1999; the 2007 audit shows overall improvement. Less bruising and fewer injection-site blemishes were among the areas in which producers showed more care in their cattle handling, practices that can prevent discounts at the packer.

In 1999, only 11% of the carcasses had no bruises. That compares to 37% with no bruises in 2007, Hale points out.

“At the plants' holding pens, 92.1% of all cattle surveyed (including beef and dairy cows) had no visible knots (injection sites). About 95.7% of beef cows and 98.7% of beef bulls had no signs of knots. However, knots in the shoulder area of beef cows rose from 0.3% in 1999 to 2.1% in 2007.”

Hale and Texas A&M University's (TAMU) Jeff Savell say the knots are likely the result of “intramuscular injections of animal-health products instead of the recommended subcutaneous injections in the neck area.”

Further packer data shows carcass weights for both cows and bulls were heavier in 2007. “In 1999, cow carcasses averaged 540.5 lbs., while bull carcasses averaged 858.5 lbs.,” Hale says. “In 2007, beef-cow carcasses averaged 634.9 lbs. and bulls averaged 873.1 lbs.”

Carcass improvements

In addition, the audit shows that 46% of carcasses in 1999 were too light (less than 500 lbs.), while 29% were too heavy, or more than 1,000 lbs. Compare that to 21% too light and 7% too heavy in 2007. Fat thickness was .22 in. in 2007, lower than the .37 in. measured in 1999.

Muscle score improved in the 2007 audit, but still shows a need to improve conditions and the timing of marketing, says Ron Gill, TAMU beef cattle specialist in Stephenville, when analyzing the audit.

About 21% of the cattle were inadequately muscled in the most recent audit. In 1999, 44% of the beef cows had a muscle score of 1. The number improved to 14% in 2007.

In body condition score, with 1 being severely emaciated and 9 obese, 86% of cows and 95% of bulls earned a 3-7 score. But overall, there were fewer moderately conditioned beef bulls and cows in 2007, with only 21% of beef cows

showing a score of 5, compared to 31% in 1999 and even 22% in 1994.

“They need a 4-5 body condition score,” Hale says, noting that 29% of beef bulls had a 5 body score in 2007, compared to 42% in 1994 and 54% in 1999.

Cull 'em quicker

“What still surprises me is the timely culling of cows, or lack thereof,” Gill says. “Cows are normally culled a year too late, past their useful lives, or not pulled out of a drought area soon enough. You just give up a lot of income.”

He stresses the need to reduce the number of thin cows and lightly muscled cows. “Both are related,” he says. “If they're too thin, they use muscle tissue to live on. Most could be fixed with a little more timely culling.”

In reviewing other data from the 2007 audit, these factors were among those noted by examiners in the packer receiving pen:

- Less than 1% of cattle traveled longer than 28 hours, with the average travel time of nine hours at a distance of 409 miles. Tractor-trailers hauled 64% of the cattle, with 36% in gooseneck or bumper-mounted trailers.
- 65% of all loads and 56% of beef loads were single gender, while 73% of multi-gender beef loads were sorted by gender.
- In cattle unloading, 65% of all loads had no cattle slips and 70% had no more than 3% cattle slips. Electric prods were used in 22% of all loads and 32% of beef cattle loads. About 14% of all loads and 15% of beef loads saw the aggressive use of driving aids (sticks, paddles, etc.) other than electric prods. About 83% of the plants used electric prods for moving cattle to the restrainer. About 39% of the plants used other objects to move cattle.

Other factors seen in the packer holding pens included:

- About 69% of all cattle, 72% of beef cows and 76% of beef bulls, had no visible defects.
- About 42.2% of beef cows and 52.3% of beef bulls had black hides, while 32.3% of beef cows and 28.6% of beef bulls had red hides.
- Brands were found on 24% of all cattle, compared to 46% in 1999.
- Polled animals totaled 83% in 2007, compared to 77% in 1999.
- Cancer eye was seen in only 3% of cows, down from 4% in 1999 and 8.5% in 1994.
- In surveying for lameness, examiners found no signs of lameness in 84% of beef cows, 69% of beef bulls and 70% of all cattle. Lames were down 11% from 1999, but up 11% from 1994.

Other packer harvest floor and cooler key points included:

- 11% of all cows were pregnant, compared to 12% in 1999 and 28% in 1994.
- For lean maturity, 27% of all carcasses were C maturity for lean, including 26% of beef cows and 37% of beef bulls. Skeletal maturity checks saw D maturity for 17% of beef cow carcasses, 26% of beef bull carcasses and 16% of all carcasses. Overall maturity shows D maturity for 39% of all carcasses, 38% of beef cow carcasses and 25% of beef bull carcasses.
- In quality grade tests, 44% of all carcasses graded Utility; 29% of all and 33% of beef cow carcasses graded as Cutters; 8% of all and 11% of beef cows graded as Cannery; and 0.2% of all carcasses graded Prime.
- In muscle scoring, the majority of beef cows had a score of 1 or 2, with an average of 2.06.
- The average yield grade was 2.6, compared to 2.4 in 1999.

Other data in the audit indicated that 64% of all cattle and 71% of beef cattle could be traced to their original owner. There were fewer downers, fewer dead and moribund cattle, fewer instances of inadequate trailer space and better loading of cattle.

Gill says the “downer rule” is improving the quality of cows going to market. “If an animal goes down and will not get up, the rules are that the handler must humanely euthanize them before removing them from the premises,” he says.

"All plants we audited didn't touch downer cattle. If they didn't get up on their own, they euthanized them and moved them out to a rendering plant."

Hale says the audit shows that even though producers are doing a better job at sending culled animals to market, more improvements are needed.

"Monitor the health of cows before putting them on a truck," he says. "And work for a better body score of 4-5. There's no place for fat cows."

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association is scheduled to provide a full account of the audit this spring. For more information, go to www.beef.org.

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