



Microwaveable and **More**

The Beef Checkoff-funded Beef Innovations Group works to meet consumer demand.

by *Sara Gugelmeyer*

In beef production, there is oftentimes a disconnect between cattlemen and the person eating the food. When a rancher goes out to chop ice every day this winter, he is probably not thinking about how the marketplace is changing and what that means for the way next year's calf crop will end up on a fork. The Beef Innovations



Group (BIG), funded by the Beef Checkoff, works diligently to bridge that gap and to marry beef products and consumer wants.

BIG invited media to its kitchen in Denver last November to share how it's helping beef producers.

What is BIG?

BIG's mission is to lead, inspire and aid beef product developers by contributing premier knowledge, skills, tools and ideas which will accelerate product innovations and new product introductions and ultimately to improve the sales, profits and competitive position of beef products in the marketplace.

BIG Executive Director Steve Wald explained at the media event that BIG incorporates expertise from meat scientists, food scientists, product developers, researchers, chefs, packaging experts, marketers and even plant operators.

"We have a group of staff, but we also have volunteers and contractors," Wald said. "These people come together to move the industry forward in the areas of product development."

Wald added that the group looks for new cuts, like they did with the flat iron steak, as well as innovative technologies. Because of detailed market research, the group is focusing on convenience products and new menu ideas for restaurants.

"The Beef Innovations Group acts as a catalyst for new product development," Wald said. "We're looking for game changers or something that is really going to move the industry forward."

Because the Millennial generation, people born between 1980 and 2000, is even greater than baby boomers in numbers, a lot of the focus is placed on Millennials' buying preferences.

"They are the new, hurried family; they're technologically advanced, but time-starved," Wald said.

Much of BIG's focus is based on the research presented by John Lundeen, senior director of market research for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA).

Lundeen also presented his market research at the Hereford Genetic Summit in September. Read more in the October *Hereford World*.

Who is today's beef consumer?

Millennials, 80 million strong, use social media as a major information source, and their beef knowledge is lower than previous generations. They want to know

where their food comes from and want ethnically diverse foods.

Lundeen said, "This is what [consumers] want from beef — make it easier, make it healthier, make it cheaper." He added that the beef industry is enjoying high prices and that consumers are willing to pay for beef as long as the taste is superb.

As far as those who have been priced out of eating beef are concerned, Lundeen said when supply catches up and prices soften, "Some [consumers] will come back because of price, but others we will have to fight for because they've found something else that their family likes."

Today's beef consumer:

- According to Lundeen, the majority, 62%, of American households have only one to two people
- More are trying to make healthy choices and do more cooking at home
- Two-thirds, 70%, of women are working and say that 60 minutes from start of prep to table is too long
- For young (under age 44) shoppers, prepared meals like take-out, deli or to-go items are eaten more and more often
- The majority of consumers lack knowledge about beef cuts and how to prepare them
- Almost all Americans eat beef; at least 90% eat beef once a month
- The major trends of in-home consumption are less roast and less steak consumption, especially for one-person households
- Ground beef is the only cut which has seen an increase of in-home consumption in the past five years
- Beef consumption is greatest in rural regions
- In foodservice, beef sales volume has nearly recovered to prerecession levels after being lowest in 2009.
- Overall consumer perception of beef is good, even slightly better than in 2007
- The most important factor to consumers is that beef tastes great
- While safety concern over chicken has been nearly the same since 2002, only 10% of consumers cited beef in the supermarket as their highest safety concern, down from 19%

Cutting-edge education

Fighting for consumers is what BIG is all about, and executive director of meat science and



Wasser demonstrates the method to remove the flat iron steak from the shoulder clod of the chuck primal.



Laura Hagen, BIG culinary senior director showed attendees around the Beef Checkoff-funded Culinary Innovations Center.

technology Bridget Wasser works hard to teach everyone from consumers to foodservice workers to packers about beef. Wasser gives presentations about beef harvesting and cutting to various groups. For example, she might give a presentation to chefs or restaurateurs about different cuts within the shoulder clod of the chuck primal. This is where the flat iron steak comes from, and she demonstrates the method used to remove it from the shoulder by hand.

The flat iron steak was just one cut made successful through the muscle profiling research done by BIG in the 1990s. The research showed that this muscle was the second most tender in the carcass. But, before the research, it was grouped with many other less tender muscles and lost its value to the consumer.

“We call it the ten-year overnight success, because it took so long to be accepted, mostly because of difficulty cutting,” Wasser said. “It needed more processing.”

Now many restaurants and grocery stores sell the flat iron steak. Wasser said there was 71 million lb. of flat iron sold into food service in 2013. That’s compared with the porterhouse and T-bone combined selling only 65 million lb.

According to a CattleFax estimate, BIG muscle profiling research has added \$50 to \$60 per carcass already, and Wasser said BIG is still working to make other underutilized cuts as popular as the flat iron with that research.

“Through product education, (chefs, retailers and more) want to know where they can get these cuts. We help marry relationships and develop interest to build supply. We help drive demand from all segments,” Wasser said. See Figure 1 for other cuts that BIG now has in various stages of development from information gained in the muscle profiling study.

Even the middle meats need help because increased carcass size has resulted in cuts too big for consumers.

“Carcass weights are increasing over time and cut sizes are increasing over time as a result. We hear that complaint a lot. They’re challenged with size too big. The temptation is to cut steaks thinner to stay at 12 ounces, which makes them more difficult not to overcook. The research is to find ways to cut the steaks up,” Wasser said.

Meal solutions

Director of Innovations and Product Solutions Shenoa French explained how working closely with the research team has helped identify consumer perceptions and problems with beef.

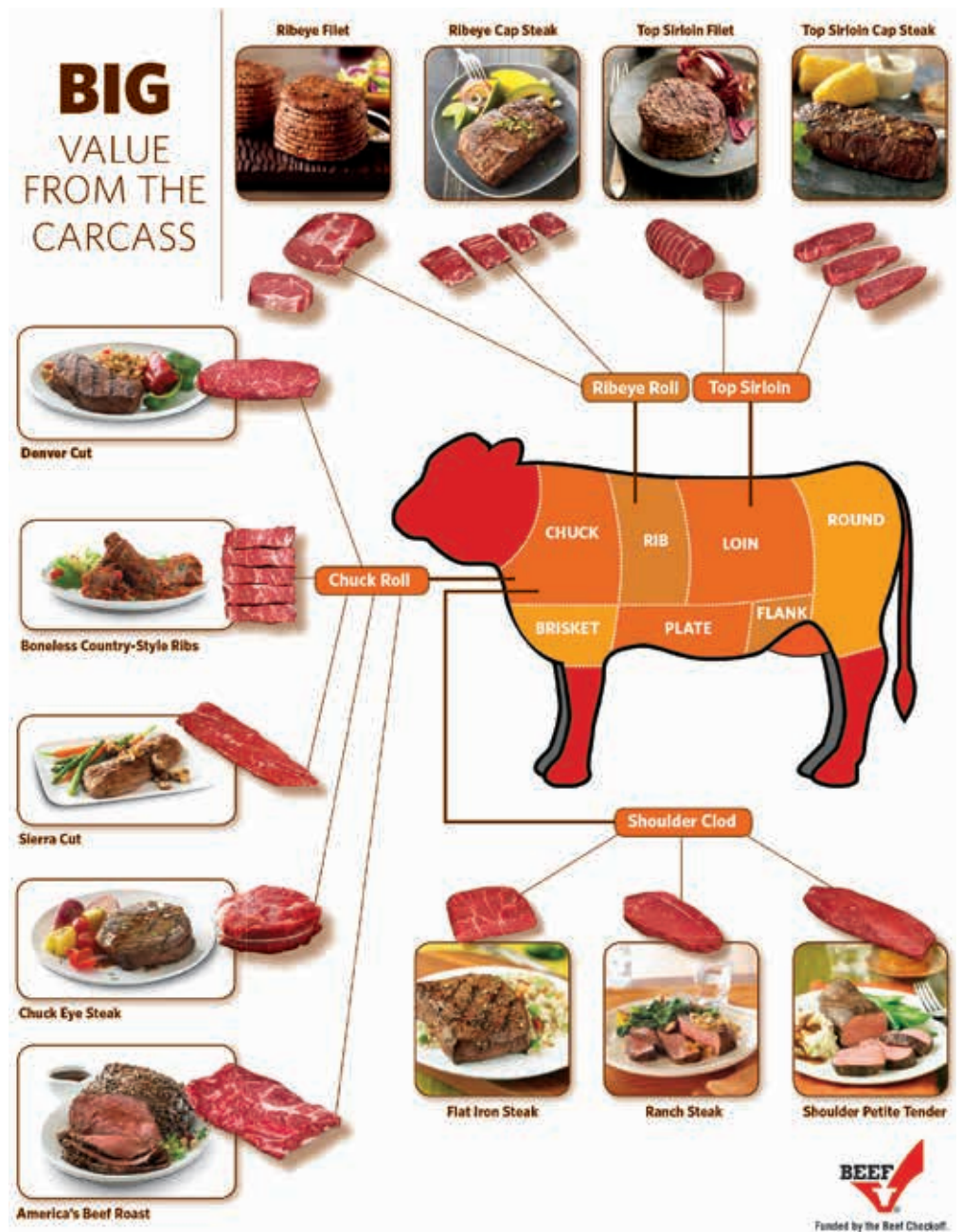
For example, it was discovered, through consumer research, that most Americans freeze ground beef after purchase. Then it must be thawed before cooking, and thawing adds prep time, or if it’s done on the counter, it could cause a safety problem. So BIG has rolled out a graphic and a video on how to properly thaw ground beef in just a couple of minutes. Watch it on YouTube under the “Beef. It’s What’s For Dinner” channel.

Also, about 43% of Americans freeze steaks before use. So, BIG has discovered that steaks can be cooked from frozen with just a few extra minutes of cook time. There is a handy chart distributed by BIG which gives guidelines on how to do just that.

Another goal of BIG is to make eating beef easier. Consumers want a fresh, wholesome, home-cooked meal on the table in 30 minutes or less. So, BIG is working on new products in new packaging. In one easy-to-read, eye-catching package, consumers can buy a cut of fresh beef, specific seasonings that will make that beef taste great and simple tried-and-true instructions so a rushed mother can make a beef meal delicious with little effort.

A very exciting project BIG has been working on is making fresh, center-of-plate entrées that can be cooked in the microwave. Just being released into test

Figure 1



BIG has other cuts of beef in various stages of development from information gained in the muscle profiling study. According to a CattleFax estimate, BIG muscle profiling research has added \$50 to \$60 per carcass. According to Bridget Wasser, BIG executive director of meat science and technology, they are working on product education to build interest in underutilized cuts.

stores are microwave seasoned tri-tip, microwave seasoned coulottes (sirloin) and mess-free microwave ground beef. All are in microwaveable, ready-to-cook packaging. All the consumer has to do is pop it in the microwave and then enjoy tasty, healthful beef in less than 20 minutes. The packaging includes a built-in drain feature so the cook doesn’t need to worry about a mess.

Also in test markets are 3-in-1 skillet meals. One example is a beef strip kit with three different seasoning options: stroganoff, beef stew or an Asian entree. That way shoppers have three options when they get home, but all ingredients are included for each.

Because so many shoppers are getting food to-go from the grocery store deli, BIG is looking for ways to tap into the chicken-dominated cold and hot delis. Now in the store test-marketing phase is the oven-roasted beef meal solution, which can be sold in the deli as premium roast beef,

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Checkoff-funded consumer research showed that most Americans freeze ground beef after purchase. Thawing before cooking adds prep time and could be a safety concern if not done properly. BIG produced a graphic and video on how to properly thaw ground beef in just a couple of minutes. Visit BeefItsWhatsForDinner.com for a full-size version of the graphic.

smoked brisket, meatballs, shredded beef and premium hand held options.

The next big thing

Wald was excited to share the latest, greatest innovation: the new and improved slow-cooker roast. All ingredients are ready to go in the package the cook only needs to drop the whole thing into a slow cooker and go. The meat is trimmed and seasoned and will be cooked to deliciousness by the end of the day. The consumer can use it for a variety of recipes or eat it as is. In focus groups, this product performed outstandingly.

“Most consumers were excited about how easy it was to prepare and most of all easy to clean up. They used the meat to prepare sandwiches, tacos, beef and noodles which created a new use for a roast they otherwise wouldn’t have bought,” Wald said.

Wald added that there are also exciting implications for foodservice, as anyplace with an outlet can be used to cook these products. As early as fall 2015, these products could be in stores and delis. **HW**

Certified Hereford Beef Innovations

There are exciting improvements happening within Certified Hereford Beef LLC as well. Mick Welch, vice president of sales, says that while right now the main focus is to sell boxed beef, CHB staff is always looking for opportunities in the marketplace.

“Value added products come in many venues and take time to introduce to our current offerings,” Welch explains. “New hires such as Mike Mitchem, director of food service, will be instrumental in education and distribution to launch new products.”

Mitchem and Welch say an important sell for them has been ground beef patties.

“The thing we’ve really gone after strongly are ground beef patties — fresh and frozen. Ground beef is such a huge part of the foodservice industry; we’ve had success especially with fresh beef patties,” Welch says.

CHB LLC has partnered with a number of ground beef processors to supply patties to foodservice customers and retailers.

“The real challenge has always been keeping product fresh and so the majority of these companies are set up so products enjoy a 28-day shelf life,” Welch explains.



One innovative way CHB LLC is reaching consumers is through the ground beef brick program. Instead of traditional chubs where the beef is hidden behind the packaging, CHB is offered in bricks with attractive labeling but clear, mess-free vacuum packaging.

Andrew Brooks, vice president of marketing, points out that CHB LLC staff is working to produce stew meat for a beef stew. It’s still in the early phases, but it’s a value-added product that really fits what

customers are looking for. Plus, expanding to different venues is a way to build on the Hereford name, Welch says, to get the product to more customers.

“We are also looking at pre-cooked products, like corned beef and pastrami,” Welch says. “There are a lot of things we can work



Mick Welch, CHB LLC vice president of sales, says ground beef patties, fresh and frozen, are a popular product in the foodservice industry. CHB LLC partners with distributors to supply ground beef to foodservice customers.

on that will be an additive to our current boxed beef program.”

He points out that CHB LLC packing partners like National Beef Packing Co. work diligently to develop products and to make them available in stores. It’s CHB’s job to provide the packers with the beef.

One product that is already available and seeing success is the flat iron steak. It’s available where CHB is sold as a case-ready cut. The shopper can then buy flat iron steaks, cook them and then slice them or slice and then cook them.

Welch adds, “We are always interested in a way to sell CHB. Whether that idea comes from our immediate staff or an outside source like BIG, we look at those offerings very seriously and see how we can apply it to expanding our awareness of our brand in the market. Ultimately we look for ways to market more beef, that’s our goal, to utilize the majority of that carcass in any way we possibly can. But it has to be of value and it has to be consumer driven.” **HW**