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After 20 Years, Quality Is Still King

Craig Huffhines

Times have certainly changed since the very first National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA) in 1991. The NBQA, conducted every five years, is a checkoff-funded survey that has provided the industry a meaningful set of guideposts and measurements relative to quality conformance of the U.S. beef supply.

At the time of the first NBQA in 1991, I was a graduate student, recently married and surviving on meat lab scraps and Friday afternoon 10-cent tacos at the local college tavern.

In the early '90s our industry was a massive commodity driven manufacturing industry, and beef quality assurance was a newborn concept. Gary Smith, Colorado State University meat science professor, afforded me the opportunity to travel to survey steak cutting operations and the incidence of injection site lesions in the top sirloin.

Most of us remember when it was customary to give intramuscular shots in the hip. This practice created quite a mess in the top sirloin due to injury, abscessing and scarring of the muscle, which ruined a relatively expensive cut of meat.

The incidence rate of injection site blemish in the top sirloin was more than 20% in 1991. According to the 2011 NBQA, injection site blemishes are not mentioned. This change is testament that once the industry determines there is a problem, we can make a difference if we care enough about our customer, the consumer.

In 1991 the top six quality challenges were 1) external fat, 2) seam fat, 3) overall palatability, 4) tenderness, 5) overall cutability and 6) marbling.

At the time, subprimal cuts were fabricated to a 1-inch fat cover specification, the population of cattle was a rainbow of colors and kinds, and branded beef was a niche even for Certified Angus Beef.

Breed associations were just beginning to look at the value of genetics in combination with newly discovered best management practices. Seedstock breeders were just wading into the water to determine the effect of their selection decisions on the profitability of their commercial customer and the value of their genetics to the feeder, packer and end-user.

The American Hereford Association (AHA) began several studies to quantify the palatability and tenderness attributes of Hereford cattle during the same period. As a result, the AHA committed itself to identifying, producing and marketing quality beef. Certified Hereford Beef was launched in 1995 with its inherent advantages in tenderness and beef eating satisfaction.

Fast forward another 20 years; there have been massive structural changes within our industry. There were 177,000 (19.5%) fewer cow-calf producers in America in 2011 compared to 1991. With the drought the last two years, the current number is probably even fewer.

Today, 80% of retailers interviewed in the 2011 NBQA participated in branded beef programs or some sort of company specification supporting their own house brand. The top-ranked challenges in the 2011 NBQA are 1) food safety; 2) eating satisfaction; 3) how and where cattle are raised; 4) lean, fat and bone (cutability); 5) weight and size; and 6) cattle genetics.

Today, "quality is still king," but for the first time, genetics is mentioned as a priority to addressing three of the top five issues.

Retailers and food service operators consider beef quality second only to food safety as a priority. In addition, consumers want more information about where their food comes from, if it is safe, and whom can they trust in the system. They are not interested in hearing about technology that makes beef cattle grow faster or more efficiently. They want to know if our cattle are being well treated in a wholesome way.

The AHA, as a seedstock organization, and you, as a seedstock breeder, play a major role in these trends. Along with the pressures of today's competition for land resource and feed commodities, we have a decision to make concerning whether or not we will provide a product for which consumers are willing to pay a very dear price.

Let's face it; beef is expensive today compared to competing proteins. Are we willing to engineer the genetics that will justify the price of beef we are asking consumers to pay? **HW**