

Cattle Business in Mississippi – April 2007 **“Beef Production Strategies” article**

Breeder Responsibilities

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Total cattle inventory in Mississippi on January 1, 2007 was 980,000 head including 518,000 head of beef cows and 99,000 head of beef cow replacements representing approximately 21,000 operations. These statistics indicate that cow-calf production is still a major segment of the beef industry in the state. As beef breeders, cow-calf producers control genetic improvement efforts, the initiation of verification processes, management of calves through a large proportion of their lives, and, therefore, have significant opportunities to affect the quality of the final beef product.

Commitment to High Quality Beef Begins with Breeders

Beef breeders are the first step in the communication sequence to transfer information that increases feeder calf value through the production chain. Communication must also flow from consumers back through the beef supply chain to cow-calf producers to keep breeders informed of production changes demanded by beef consumers. The National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA) is a U.S. beef industry self analysis performed last in 2005 that determines benchmarks and goals for various segments of the industry. Thus, the NBQA serves as a leading source of information linking consumers all the way back through the production chain to cow-calf producers. One common theme identified in the 2005 NBQA is that the beef chain is still segmented and disconnected from consumers. In other words, there is a need for increased communication among seedstock breeders, commercial cow-calf producers, stocker and backgrounder operators, feeders, packers, and consumers to ensure that needed changes are implemented in the various industry segments to improve overall beef quality.

Verification Begins with Breeders

A more specific common theme pinpointed in the 2005 NBQA is that “we must have traceability for age/source/process verification”. Industry goals laid out in the 2005 NBQA include a recommendation to move expeditiously toward source and age verification to build supply lines of cattle to fit domestic and export markets. While source-verified and age-verified cattle as a percentage of total cattle harvested continue to increase, they accounted for only 1.5% and 1.0% of cattle in 2005 as reported in the latest NBQA. Verifying source and age is one of the strategies listed in the 2005 NBQA for expanding marketing opportunities in domestic and global markets.

In the 2005 NBQA increased record keeping, increased individual animal information, and maintenance of health/management data ranked in the top eight changes requested from their suppliers by each of the following groups: cow-calf producers, stockers/backgrounders, and feedlot operators. Desire for traceback ranked in the top five greatest quality challenges identified by purveyors, retailers, and restaurateurs. Along these same lines, an industry goal highlighted in the recent NBQA is to clarify

beef market signals that encourage production of cattle, carcasses and cuts that conform to industry targets.

As an example of this, several Mississippi producers have already captured premiums on fed cattle that were age and source verified in the amount of \$25 per head back to the cow-calf producer. While current marketing conditions and the specific market outlets utilized affect the availability and level of premiums for source, age, and process verification, one thing that is certain is that only those producers who actively pursue verification programs will cash in on these premiums. Considering the simplicity of verification (sometimes as easy as keeping a written record of the age of the oldest calf in the group and signing an affidavit stating that the information provided on a group of calves is accurate), this is easy money to bring home to cow-calf producers' pockets.

Genetic Improvement Begins with Breeders

An increasing number of cow-calf producers, both seedstock and commercial, are participating in the Mississippi Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program. "Targeted Breeding" is one of the focuses of the Mississippi BQA program. The "Targeted Breeding" message is that cow-calf producers bear considerable responsibility in the quality of the final beef product. Much of the impact that cow-calf producers have on the quality of beef consumed is through genetic decisions. As a notable cow-calf state, Mississippi seedstock and commercial breeders can significantly impact beef quality by improving breeding decisions.

Genetics were consistently listed as a top beef quality issue with various segments of the beef industry in the 2005 NBQA. Cow-calf producers prioritized the following changes requested from their suppliers:

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Quality Challenge</u>
1	Improving genetics using performance data
2	Improving genetics using carcass traits
3	Improving genetics using physical traits
5	Improving genetics using ultrasound
9	Using genetic data

Stocker operators and backgrounders ranked genetic issues as important changes requested from their suppliers as follows:

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Quality Challenge</u>
1	Change the genetic type(s) of cattle
7	Provide incentive for genetic superiority
10	Collect and use carcass data

Similarly, feedlot operators recognized genetic improvements as high priority and ranked changes requested from their supplies in the following order:

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Quality Challenge</u>
1	Change the genetic type(s) of cattle
10	Provide incentive for genetic superiority

It is very clear from the recent NBQA results that genetic improvements are demanded throughout the industry. So what should breeders target? Specifically, the Audit revealed that “cattle are too big, too fat and have too little marbling”. Additionally, consistency and uniformity in cattle production was a key concern that could be addressed through targeted breeding programs. Although there are currently few tools to incorporate tenderness into selection programs, tenderness was cited as a trait that should be considered in future genetic and management decisions. Finally, with increasing numbers of cattle marketed “on a grid” (33.7% in 2005) or “in-the-beef” (25.5% in 2005), genetic improvement programs tackling carcass traits can position producers to be more competitive in capturing added value from cattle with desirable performance and carcass characteristics.

The National Beef Cattle Evaluation Consortium’s (NBCEC) “Beef Sire Selection Manual” publication is an excellent reference for seedstock and commercial cow-calf producers to use in designing breeding programs to meet the goals outlined above. Limited supplies of this publication can be obtained upon request through the Mississippi Beef Cattle Improvement Association: msucares.com/livestock/beef/mbcia. Additional hard copies of the publication can also be purchased for a nominal fee directly from the NBCEC. Contact information is available online at www.nbcec.org/nbcec. A downloadable version of the Beef Sire Selection Manual is also available on the NBCEC website.

Challenge to Breeders

The Beef Quality Assurance Code of Conduct includes a statement that reads, “I received training in BQA and use it on my beef cattle enterprise because I have a commitment to consumers to produce the safest, highest quality beef in the world.” As more individual cow-calf producers adopt this emphasis on making decisions in their operation that contribute to enhanced beef quality, this greater the positive impact that the cow-calf segment can have on the entire beef industry achieving desired beef quality levels. Cow-calf producers, of which Mississippi has a considerable number, are in a position to take up this attitude of increased accountability and drive improvements in the beef industry. Staying informed of industry quality challenges and trends, keeping up with research and technology updates, and communicating with genetic suppliers and calf customers to produce a high quality product are crucial responsibilities of all Mississippi cow-calf producers. For more information on beef cattle production, contact your local Extension office.