

USDA Proposes Change In Beef Grading

Consumers are invited to comment on a U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposal to revise the U. S. standards for grades of beef.

The proposal would make it possible for slightly leaner beef to qualify for the top grades; make the "eating quality" of beef within each grade more nearly uniform; establish a more restrictive "Good" grade; and require that all beef graded for quality also be graded for "yield" (percentage of retail cuts).

In making the announcement, officials noted that the USDA has received many different recommendations relating to changes in beef grade standards from major segments of the cattle and beef industry and from individual consumers.

John C. Pierce, Director of the Livestock Division of USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service--the agency responsible for meat grading--said: "USDA meat specialists have studied all of the proposals made and reviewed available research before formulating the

proposal. We feel strongly that grade standards should be based on sound research and we recognize that the research supporting some of the changes we are proposing is not as conclusive as would be desirable. However, we believe that we should move forward with this proposal because, in our view, it reflects the best information currently available and because we believe that it is in the public interest.

Federal grading of beef is a voluntary service for which users pay a fee. Most beef which now qualifies for the top two grades (Prime and Choice) is federally graded for quality, but only about a fourth of the beef eligible for the present good grade is graded. Beef which is not federally graded sells under packer or retailer brand names or without any such identification.

USDA yield grades, identified by numbers from 1 to 5, are also optionally available for trading between packers and retailers to identify the percentage of trimmed retail cuts that the carcass will produce. The use of the higher yield grades--1, 2, and 3--is increasing, but 4's and 5's are used infrequently regardless of the quality grade of the carcass.

Federal standards for each grade of beef are established by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). They are paralleled by grade standards for slaughter cattle, and corresponding changes are also proposed for these grades. Although there is no Federal grading service for live animals, the grades are used as the basis for trading

in slaughter cattle and in market reporting. The grades provide a language of quality and a means of reflecting consumer preferences back through the marketing system to producers.

Present quality grades for beef are based primarily on "marbling" (flecks of fat within the lean); "maturity" (age of the animal when slaughtered); and "conformation" (shape of the carcass). The proposed revisions of the grade standards for beef and for slaughter cattle are detailed and technical, but the major changes can be summarized as follows:

1. Conformation would be eliminated from the factors used in determining quality grades.

2. All carcasses graded would be identified for both quality grade and yield grade.

3. For beef from cattle under about 30 months of age, the minimum amount of marbling required in each grade--except Good--would be set at the level now required for the youngest carcasses that qualify as beef instead of increasing with increasing maturity as at present. For beef from cattle over about 30 months old, increased marbling would still be required with increasing maturity within each grade.

4. For the Good grade, the minimum marbling requirement would be increased for the youngest carcasses. This would narrow the range of quality within the grade by one-third.

There are several reasons for the proposed changes.

In general, increases in marbling improve the palatability or eating quality of beef, but increases in maturity have the opposite effect. For that reason, present grades require more marbling for older carcasses. But some recent research has indicated that for younger cattle (under 30 months of age) maturity changes do not have a significant effect upon palatability. Therefore, it is proposed that within each of the Prime, Choice, Good, and Standard grades the minimum requirement for marbling be the same for all carcasses from animals under 30 months of age. The reduction in marbling requirements would result in slightly leaner beef with less excess fat, particularly in the Prime and Choice grades, and less grain would be required to produce cattle that would qualify for the top grades.

Conformation (shape) does not affect the eating quality of beef. It does affect yields of retail cuts. Its contribution in that respect, however, is measured by yield grades. Therefore, it is proposed to drop conformation from the factors that determine quality grades. Such action would make the quality of beef within each grade more uniform than is now the case. For example, under the present system, if a beef carcass has Prime grade quality but has only Good grade conformation, it is graded Choice. Under the proposed standards, beef in each of the grades would include only beef of that quality.

One of the major changes proposed--and the one which may have the most far-reaching effect in reducing the amount of excess fat on beef carcasses--is that of requiring yield grading for major factor determining its yield grade. The less trimmable fat, the higher the yield grade and the more the carcass is worth. At current retail prices, carcasses of the same weight and quality grade--Choice for example--can vary in value by more than \$75 due to differences in yields of trimmed retail cuts.

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such differences--which is possible through the yield grades--could provide a powerful incentive for producing truly "meat-type" cattle--those that have the genetic ability to produce carcasses which combine high cutability and high quality lean. And since the production of these meat-type cattle would require less grain, this would lower production costs. The net effect--increased production, at less cost, and less waste fat--could be reflected in lower prices at the retail level.

The revised Good grade also would require less grain feeding than needed for the Choice grade. It is designed as a special, very uniform

grade that should appeal to consumers who prefer beef with less internal and surface fat than that graded as Choice.

The proposed standards were published in the Sept. 11 issue of the Federal Register. Copies of the proposal may be obtained from the Director, Livestock Marketing Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. 20250.

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