

## Proposed beef grading changes go to USDA

DENVER, Colo. — The U.S. Department of Agriculture now has under consideration a National Cattlemen's Assn. petition for improvement in and modernization of USDA's beef grading standards.

The NCA request for grading changes, supported by extensive research and other data, was officially submitted recently to USDA's Food Safety and Quality Service. NCA said the proposal was developed in response to consumer demand for leaner beef.

The proposed modifications, NCA explained, are aimed at the production of leaner beef, with less trimmable fat, while maintaining desired eating quality — including tenderness, juiciness and flavor.

Changes in the quality standards were recommended by NCA's grading committee after two years of study, and the proposal was approved by the association membership at the last annual meeting.

In a letter to FSQS, NCA President J.W. (Bill) Swan described the grading changes as relatively simple. However, he said, they would update the grading system, in line with new research information, changes in beef production practices and changes in consumer preferences.

Some fat is essential for the eating satisfaction which consumers expect from beef, Swan noted, but excessive fat is wasteful of energy. It is costly to produce

and then trim away, and it obviously is not desired by consumers, he said.

The proposed grading revision, he added, would discourage over-feeding which now occurs at time in feeders' efforts to get a larger percentage of cattle into the Choice grade, and it would encourage the production of beef with a higher ratio of lean to fat. Also, the revised grading system would be more objective, resulting in more uniform eating quality within each of the Prime, Choice and Good grades.

NCA's proposal cites 42 scientific references showing that, particularly with today's production and feeding programs, marbling as a quality criterion has been

over-emphasized.

Under the NCA proposal, beef would continue to qualify for Choice if it had a "small" or "modest" amount of marbling (flecks of fat). In addition, beef with a "slight" amount of marbling would grade Choice, provided there was a minimum of 0.3 inch of fat cover over the 12th rib.

This amount of fat cover, NCA explained, is highly correlated with eating satisfaction. It reflects sufficient grain feeding time. And,

through its insulating properties, it minimizes cold-induced toughening of muscle fibers at the time beef is chilled.

The NCA proposal also would redefine the Good grade to provide a larger amount of Good grade beef. This will appeal to some consumers, NCA said.

Swan said NCA will seek the fastest possible USDA action on the grading proposal. However, required regulatory procedures mean that any grading changes could be 6 to 12 months away.

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