



Don Knore, vice president of cattle procurement for Laura's Lean Beef Company, Winchester and Lexington, Ky., seated with tie, spoke last month at the Pennsylvania Grazing and Forage Conference in Grantville.

Pasture-Based Beef Can Pay Premium

ANDY ANDREWS
Lancaster Farming Staff

GRANTVILLE (Dauphin Co.) — Raising pasture-based beef can pay some good premiums, particularly if producers are willing to follow a simple plan that delivers carcasses under a brand name.

Producers can see up to \$20 a hundredweight bonus on Select meat from a carcass with a Yield Grade of .5 to 1.1, noted Don Knore, vice president of cattle procurement for Laura's Lean Beef Company, Winchester and Lexington, Ky.

Knore spoke in early March at the 2000 Pennsylvania Grazing and Forage Conference at the Grantville Holiday Inn.

Laura's Lean Beef Company began in 1985 by Laura Freeman, a seventh-generation cattle farmer from Winchester. A political science major from Duke University, Freeman, of Mt. Folly Farm, saw how difficult it was to gain a profit from marketing beef the traditional way.

After the birth of Freeman's child, the doctor told Freeman to cut red meat from her diet — something she struggled with. As a result, Freeman, with help from experts in the field, came up with a way to produce highly lean beef that remains palatable and could carve out a niche for itself in the marketplace.

Knore said that in the company's first year, sales were about \$10,000. By 1990, the beef brand was available in 60 stores with annual sales of \$1 million.

Since 1991, the company has experienced a 40 percent growth in annual sales. In February, the company saw its sales rise to \$1 million per week.

The branded product is low fat with no additives, no growth hormones, with highly marbled, high choice or prime red meat. The company also added coupons and recipes to its in-store items.

Knore said the beef was the first red meat certified by the American Heart Association with the heart checkoff. With that endorsement, sales rose 15-20 percent "overnight," he said.

The company employs about 80, of which half are in sales. They purchase lean, heavily muscled animals from the Limousin, Charolais,

Simmental, and other breeds, with at least 3/4 blood Continental (no Brahmans or English breeds).

About 95 percent of the cattle are out of Limousin or Charolais bulls, Knore said.

The cattle must grade choice, low or high select. Calves must be weaned for 30 days, dehorned, castrated, vaccinated, dewormed, with thin or average flesh, bunk broke, and eating feed.

The calves need to be properly vaccinated for shipping fever, IBR/BVD, and other diseases, and free from respiratory problems or black leg.

The key components: no growth hormones or steroids are allowed to be used with the beef, and no animal tissue and by-products can be fed. Also, the animals are not allowed to be fed chemically or genetically altered products (these could have a "negative impact at the consumer level," said Knore), and no fecal material or artificial roughages are allowed.

Materials allowed are vitamins, minerals, and natural feeds from alfalfa hay to yeast. Also, silages and especially pastures are welcome.

Laura's Lean Beef needs a carcass specification of 675-700 pounds at 20 months of age, backfat measuring 0.2 inch or less, with a ribeye of 14-16 square inches, an internal KPH fat percentage of 2 percent, at a final yield grade of .7- 1.1. The lower the yield grade, the better.

The cattle can grade Select, Choice, or Laura's Select (any standard grade cattle with a ribeye measurement greater than USDA's schedule). For steers, desired carcass weights are 515-800 pounds. For heifers, desired are carcasses weighing 550-775 pounds.

Any carcasses outside the range will be discounted, Knore noted.

To pay for the premiums at the retail case, Laura's Lean Beef charges about 25 percent more per pound, from \$2.79-\$2.99 pound for ground beef that is 92 percent lean. Steaks are about \$7.99 per pound at the retail level.

Laura's Lean Beef Company will pay a premium up to 5 cents per pound over the top market price for cattle, according to information in the company's brochure.

Average rail price for Laura's brand last year was \$1.17 a pound for lean. Standard commodity prices were about \$1.04 per pound, Knore said, for 700-pound carcasses.

The company markets more than 40,000 head per year, besides 15,000 bulls, for the product. They continue to look for cattle they can purchase fed on grass.

For more information, contact Knore at (606) 299-7707, or for additional information, (800) ITS-LEAN. The company also has a Website, www.laurasleanbeef.com.



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