

Bovine Welfare Forum Explores Link Between Contented Cattle And Quality Products

SCHAUMBURG, Ill. — Where's the beef today? If the numbers are right, it's a part of nearly every meal. Consumers are reacting to improvements being made in the safety, quality, and wholesomeness of everything from hamburger to filet mignon, and are eating beef more than any other meat.

"The US beef industry is looking back down the chain from harvest to birth and instituting source-verification programs," said Robert Smith, DVM, a beef feedlot consultant and part-time professor of veterinary medicine at Oklahoma State University. "Branded" beef products hold the industry accountable for animal care and meat quality because consumers know who produced the meat and under what circumstances it was produced."

Dr. Smith will discuss health, comfort, and production practices for beef cattle in feedlots at the American Veterinary Medical Association's Animal Welfare Forum, Nov. 10, 2000, in Itasca, Illinois.

With more and more beef producers joining quality-assurance programs developed by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and state cattle producer affiliates, better and safer beef is being produced. Alliances or marketing cooperatives, such as Nebraska Corn-Fed Beef, Ranchers Renaissance, and the Farmland Supreme Beef Alliance, put a name on the product. Consumers have responded with their pocketbooks — and their appetites. According to the USDA, per capita consumption of boneless beef reached 66 pounds in 1999.

Concerns about food safety have also had a major impact on beef consumption. Governmental regulations and proactive industry measures taken by groups like the Beef Industry Food Safety Council have greatly reduced the incidence of food-borne bacteria.

And there is more good news from the dietary front. Milk and beef are important sources of conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which has been found to inhibit carcinogenesis in experimental animals. In the September 2000 issue of The AABP Proceedings, CLA was noted as a potent anti-carcinogen in all cancer models tested. Dr. Smith is the editor of the proceedings, published by the American Association of

Bovine Practitioners. In addition, a joint 72-week study by the University of Minnesota and Johns Hopkins University revealed that blood cholesterol levels dropped when six-ounces of lean red meat were eaten on a daily basis.

Great findings, says Dr. Smith, but all for naught unless our cattle are treated well. "Happy animals will produce better and will enable us to meet the increasing demand for beef and dairy products," he said. "Cattle deserve the best care possible, and consumers expect nothing less."

Feedlots are big business, with Texas alone feeding more than six million cattle annually. Typical feedlots resemble small cities, with alleys or "streets" running between large dirt pens. Pens can hold 75 to 300 cattle, depending on weight. And

feedlots are a bustling business as well.

Every day, feed callers use the streets as they determine the quantity of feed to be delivered to each pen. Large feed trucks bring freshly prepared feed to the cattle two to three times daily. Maintenance crews travel the streets to keep all aspects of the feedlot in good repair. Night watchers are on duty, just in case something goes awry. Pen checkers, or pen riders, on horseback ride through each pen to oversee the general condition of cattle.

Pen riders are responsible for 5,000 to 10,000 cattle per day, and pens are checked seven days a week, year round. Christmas Day is no exception. There is also a crew trained by consulting veterinarians to assist in evaluating a steer or heifer's condition. "At the feedlots, we try to

provide the best health care possible," said Dr. Smith. "Animals are like young children. Cattle can't tell us what's wrong, so we have to check them often, and early intervention can mean a more successful treatment."

The details of a treatment protocol are entered into an on-site computer and include other health care information, such as vaccinations, drugs and dosages, and body temperature and weight, which is matched to a calf's tag identification number. Technology has enhanced many health care and maintenance aspects of feedlots, but it is the people who continue to provide the hands-on interaction that cattle enjoy.

"Feedlot cattle are curious and playful. They seem comfortable, lying around and chewing their cud," Dr. Smith said. "There's a perception that these

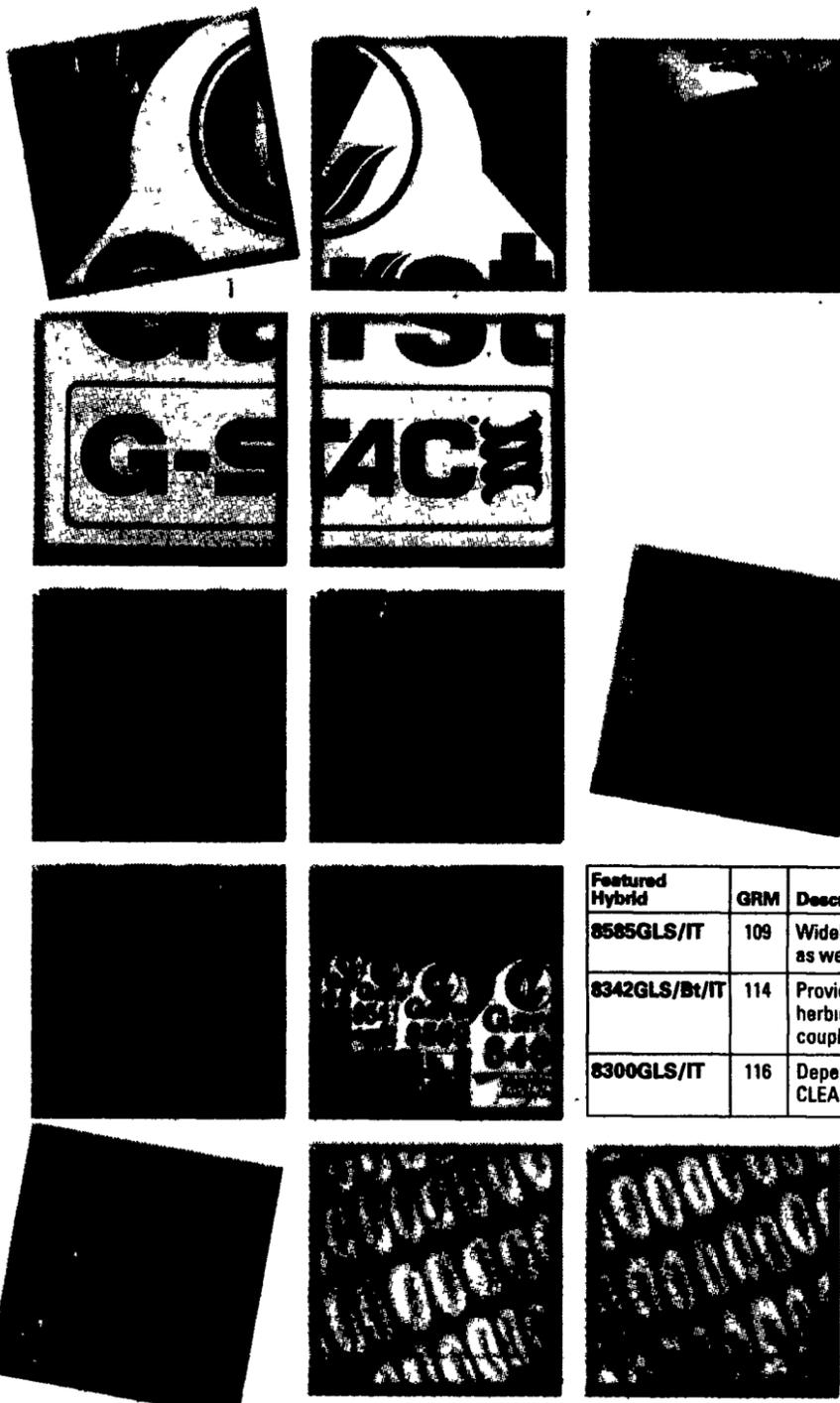
cattle live in unnatural, sub-standard conditions, but behavior in the feedlot is very similar to that observed on pasture."

That's not to say that life in either setting is always ideal. Respiratory disease is the main cause of death in feedlots. About 0.10% of the cattle die each month. A second area of concern is digestive diseases, but reformulated diets have dramatically decreased death losses to 0.04% per month in recent years.

Stress — and its relationship to food safety and animal welfare — is a growing area of livestock research. Julie Morrow-Tesch, PhD, is a research leader with the USDA-ARS at Texas Tech University who is studying the behavior and physiology of feedlot cattle. She will also speak at the Forum and will evaluate management practices and their impact on animal welfare.

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