

# Over The Wire

A Beef Cattle E-Letter for Area Cattle Producers

## Beef Quality Audit

By: Jim Church

University of Idaho Extension

### *2011 Beef Quality Audit*

Results from the 2011 National Beef Quality Audit were published last month and the results were interesting. The Audit was funded by the Beef Industry Checkoff and was first conducted in 1991 and every five years since. The industry has seen some big changes over the last 20 years.

The major concerns in the 1991 beef quality audit centered around product quality attributes such as external fat, seam fat, and overall palatability. In 2011, the top concerns were more directed toward food safety, where and how the animals were raised and eating satisfaction. Below is a summary of the ranked quality concerns for each audit starting in 1991:

### *Beef Quality Challenges—Ranked According to Priority.*

1991	1995	2000	2005	2011
External Fat	Overall Uniformity	Overall Uniformity	Traceability	Food Safety
Seam Fat	Overall Palatability	Carcass Weights	Uniformity	Eating Satisfaction
Palatability	Marbling	Tenderness	Instrument Grading	How and Where Cattle are Raised
Tenderness	Tenderness	Marbling	Market Signals	Lean, Fat & Bone
Cutability	External & Seam Fat	Reduced Quality From Implants	Segmentation	Weight & Size
Marbling	Cut Weights	External Fat	Carcass Weights	Cattle Genetics

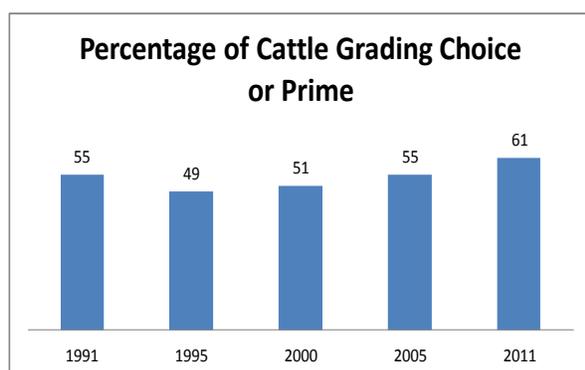
Source: NBQA

## ***Has There Been Any Progress in 20 Years?***

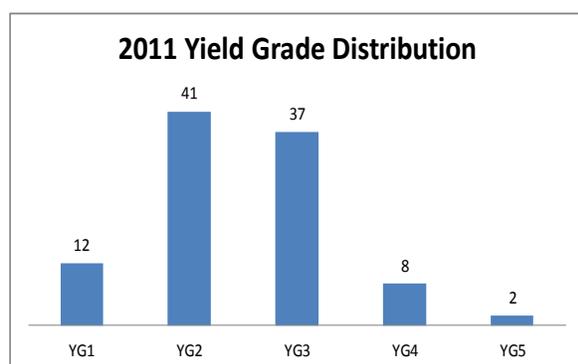
I think that there has definitely been some progress made in the industry since we first started the audits in 1991. When you look at carcass quality, we have increased the number of cattle grading Choice or Prime from 55% in 1991 to 61% in 2011. We saw a decline in this figure down to 49% in 1995, back to 51% in 2000 and 55% in 2005.

I was really glad to see that we have increased this up to 61%.

Below is a table showing the trend over the last 20 years in cattle grading Choice and or Prime:



If you look at yield grade, the 2011 audit showed that approximately 90% of all finished cattle graded Yield Grade 3 or higher, with 12% grading Yield Grade 1, 41% Yield Grade 2 and 37% Yield Grade 3. This is good news. Only 10% of the cattle were Yield Grade 4 or 5.



It appears the industry has done a good job of addressing External Fat and Seam Fat. These two concerns were ranked first and second in the 1991 audit.

Overall palatability and tenderness were also in the top five concerns in 1991. Consumers were wanting a consistently flavorful, tender product and were not getting it. In the 2011 audit, eating satisfaction was ranked as the second highest concern so we still have some work to do, but it appears that the industry is making strides in improving the eating experience for consumers.

## ***New Concerns!***

What is interesting to me is the change in society over the last 20 years. Two of the top five challenges to the beef industry deal with food safety, which is ranked first and the fact that consumers want to know how and where the cattle were raised; the number three ranked challenge.

What does this mean for producers? Probably that we will need to document our management practices more, yeah, more record keeping. Also, you may see more of a push for source and age verification of our cattle. People want to know where they came from.

It also appears that we may see an increase in branded beef programs as well. An example of a branded beef program would be the Certified Angus Beef Program or the Certified Hereford Beef Program. Of course there are many more. There has been a big push for these programs over the last decade and look for this trend to be even stronger.

Carcass weights and size are starting to be a challenge due to the increase in cattle size and finished weights over the last 20 years. This is why even with the national cow herd numbers being small, approximately the same size as in the early 1950's, we are still producing the same amount of beef as we produced in the 1980's and 1990's.

I have seen a push recently to try and decrease the size of our cows. It will be interesting to see how this plays out in the next five to ten years.

One of the top challenges identified in the 2011 audit was Cattle Genetics. I am not sure exactly what the concern is in regards to genetics.

I would suppose that as an industry we need to be able to identify efficient cattle that will grow rapidly on a roughage based diet. With extremely high feed costs, especially grain, we need cattle that will finish in a shorter time on more roughages and less grain.

We have to identify cattle that can do this. It will be a challenge and will take years of selection pressure. The good news is we have the technology that will help us identify these cattle.

### ***Summary***

The beef cattle industry in the United States should be proud of the fact that every five years there is a quality audit to identify strengths, weaknesses and trends in the industry. In my opinion, this is much needed and is money well spent.

Improvements and changes can only be made when performance data is collected on a periodic basis.

In general, the latest audit showed that cattle producers have done a tremendous job in producing cattle that will grow rapidly with a high percentage grading choice or better. Producers have worked hard to produce a product that will provide a desirable eating experience for consumers. Progress has been made in this area. We still have a ways to go on consistency but progress is being made.

Finally, the 2011 audit showed that cattle producers need to tell their story to consumers. Consumers want to know how their food is raised. Producers should take every opportunity to tell consumers how they raise and care for their cattle. If the industry doesn't tell the story, someone else will and it may not be an accurate depiction of how cattle are treated on farms and ranches across this country.

**Contact Information:** Jim Church, 320 West Main, Grangeville, Idaho 83530; email: [jchurch@uidaho.edu](mailto:jchurch@uidaho.edu); phone: 208-983-2667.

### **References:**

Pillars of Beef Chain Success, Moving The Industry Forward. National Cattlemen's Beef Association, Cattlemen's Beef Board. National Beef Quality Audit—2011.

To enrich education through diversity, The University of Idaho is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer and educational institution.