



Profit with the Meat Standards Australia Grading Scheme

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Abstract

An effective grading system has been identified as a key factor for improving demand for beef.

An efficient system needs to deliver a product that will provide consistent quality each time the consumer purchases beef.

This paper outlines the basis for the grading program, current developments, implementation and the need to integrate fully into the marketing arena.

The benefits to individual cattle producers will be significant over time given the expected affect on consumer demand. The potential to utilise feedback data to improve individual herds is unlimited.

Background of the Meat Standards Australia Grading Scheme

The Meat Standards Australia (MSA) grading program was developed primarily to promote the Australian beef industry by providing a scientific basis to determine and identify desired eating traits in a beef carcass. The necessity of the scheme has been driven by the fact that consumer demand has been declining for the past several years and was showing no signs of improving. Therefore, in order for the beef industry to remain viable and profitable it was determined that the trend must be reversed. To assist in achieving this consumers must be able to buy a consistent, tender, palatable serving of beef each time they made a purchase from their favourite retail market or butcher shop.

Many nations throughout the world have beef grading systems operating successfully which identify the eating traits and allow the consumer to select consistent beef products based on the grades of their choice. However, the criteria used in these established systems did not necessarily reflect taste preferences of consumers nor traits, which were unique in most Australian beef carcasses. Therefore it was decided by Meat and Livestock Australia to develop a system to identify beef which was tender and provided an overall good eating experience for consumers.

Basis of the Australian system

The system would be based on the preferred taste of Australian consumers using a taste panel to judge the beef cut for tenderness, flavour, juiciness, and overall liking of the taste. The system would also incorporate a cooking method most suitable for a cut of beef and the result would be an overall quality score designated as CMQ4.

The grading program was developed to incorporate the factors that consumers identified as providing the most desirable tasting piece of beef in the consumer taste panels. The factors established to use for the grading of carcasses are identified as maturity of the carcass determined by the skeletal details of the carcass, visible intermuscular fat,



Bos Indicus %, carcass hanging method, pH/ temp, ultimate pH, aging of the meat product, carcass weight and cooking method. Based on these criteria, Meat Standards Australia designed a grading system to be based on the eating quality of the beef cuts as determined by the taste panels. The system identifies the tenderness in each cut and is divided into a three tiered grading system. The three grades of beef identified by the system are Tenderness Guaranteed, Premium and Supreme, originally known as 3, 4, and 5 Star product. The system has the ability to predict tenderness in beef with enough confidence to make the MSA Promise "If you cook this piece of beef this way, it will eat as described".

We have now conducted in excess of 300,000 consumer taste tests and have determined the factors we are using in the grading scheme continue to identify the traits consumers prefer. The tests have repeatedly shown tastes remain the same, time after time in identifying what beef consumers think has the correct eating quality. We have been able to further refine the parameters of the quality grades based on the numerous taste panel results and have continually updated the grading model in order to identify as many beef cuts as possible for the grade without compromising the quality grading program.

Future direction of the MSA grading program

The grading program has rapidly expanded following the initial launch in the Brisbane area followed by the Sydney launch. The introduction in Western Australia was successfully completed in March 2000. Victoria and Southern Australia are being approached on a supply versus location basis and the progress has been very satisfactory. We have licensed numerous producers, retailers, wholesalers and processors as participants in the grading program. We continue to license additional users of the program as the benefits spread based on the success of current users of graded beef. As all of you are aware, it is a requirement of the program that all participants in the MSA grading program be licensed. This includes all producers, feedlots, processors, wholesalers and retailers as well as all butcher retail shops. By so doing all participants are trained in the proper handling of the program beef from paddock to palate.

The future of the program relies on (1) providing training to people in all stages of the pathway and (2) gaining the confidence of program participants that the program in fact identifies the eating value and that it adds value to the livestock and meat industry. The training is currently being provided by a wide variety of trained industry personnel including the graders in the MSA program. The latter can only be accomplished by providing all consumers the opportunity to purchase Tenderness Guaranteed beef thereby, increasing their confidence in the beef product as a consistent desirable eating experience. To accomplish this, it is imperative that all sectors of the industry actively support the program by both actions and words. We need to encourage all sectors of the consuming public to use the grading program, to guide the purchases of their beef meals in order to obtain a consistent, tenderness guaranteed product.

The grading program has proven to be an effective tool to identify eating characteristics of beef cuts. As a system of grading, we must fully implement the program on an Australia wide basis and then commence to establish a market for MSA graded beef on a worldwide scope. The MSA grading program will provide a very credible vehicle



of entry into the export market to compete with other countries who have established beef grading programs recognised and respected on a world wide basis. We can reach that plateau with Australian beef if we continue to promote the grading and sales of graded product on a domestic and export market.

Opportunities for producers

What is in the program for you as producers of beef and how will the program benefit and provide profit for me? The present market for live cattle is substantially strong. However, a major portion of the beef sold in Australia finds it's way into the export market and the price received is very dependent on other competitive country output. The per capita consumption of beef continues to decline for various reasons and at least one of those reasons is the lack of a supply of beef, which is uniform, tender and consistent. As producers of beef for consumption by your customers; the MLA suggest full participation and support for the MSA grading program. In my opinion the scheme offers a long-term solution to many of the customers concerns about the inconsistent supply of retail beef.

The MLA believe that as consumers recognise the improvement in the eating quality of beef identified by the grade names, they will come to rely on beef as their primary source of protein, vitamin and minerals and increase their consumption. When this occurs, the result will be an increased demand for your product and perhaps an increase in the price you receive for your cattle. The MLA remind you that this will not happen over night. The grading program has been operating on a broad scale for less than one year and is not at this time offered to all of Australia. We must have it operating on a national basis and be recognised by consumers as a value adding system they can rely on to purchase beef cuts. Only at that time will all segments of the industry profit from the benefits of the scheme. In the future, each of you participating in the program and providing a supply of cattle licensed to be sold as MSA graded carcasses could very well commence to receive a premium price for their livestock. This should occur as the demand for graded product increases because of its appeal to consumers. In addition, each producer participating in the program will receive carcass feed back from the MSA program identifying carcass traits in the cattle sold. The feed back information can be used for many management functions such as breeding traits, handling of cattle, transport, and feeding for optimal performance. The potential to utilise the data to grade up your individual herds is unlimited.

Conclusion

In conclusion, The MLA challenge each of you by saying: The future of the cattle industry is in your hands. There is a very real opportunity for all to improve the overall beef industry in Australia through Meat and Livestock Australia and the Meat Standards Australia grading scheme. The MLA challenge each of you to produce cattle, which will give the industry customers the eating experience they desire and deserve. The MLA urge the industry to support the system identifying beef cuts having the traits that will give a good eating experience every time. "The Choice Is Yours" don't pass it up by being non-supportive of a very sound system of identifying beef eating quality traits.