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The US fed beef export market is mostly because of the higher quality of our beef compared with our competition (Brazil, Australia and India - recall that Warren Prosser of CattleFax, told us at the summer ACGA convention that India had become the largest exporter of overall beef products in the world). Our export market depends on us maintaining and improving the quality of our beef.

**Barriers to Success:** The 2011 NBQA helped put focus on key shortcomings that must be addressed. They are:

- The low level of written protocols
- Balancing needs of, and developing trust between, all segments of the beef industry – there is no common language
- Carcass inconsistency – large variations in size and quality
- Potential safety issues
- Poor storytelling to the public (our customers)

#### **What can an Arizona rancher do?**

First, use genetic characteristics for bull selection. Progress in the quality of US cattle has been and will be obtained by genetic improvement. Over the last 20 years researchers, breed associations and companies have developed practical tools for predicting economically important characteristics of calves from an individual bull. The most common technique used for prediction is EPDs (Expected Progeny Differences). This predicts how a particular trait (i.e. birth weight) is likely for the calves from this bull compared to the average of that trait in that breed. Most seedstock producers now give several EPDs on all their bulls for sale. One can actually measure some characteristics (with ultra-sound) in individual yearling bulls (i.e., area of their ribeye and its intramuscular fat (IMF) – marbling). In addition, some breeders do DNA testing of each bull to give predicted characteristics of the individual bulls for sale.

Recently they have developed a way to measure the feed conversion efficiencies (pounds of feed needed to add a pound of weight) for individual bulls. Some select sales now do this measurement and have the results available at sale time. (A large seedstock producer in South Dakota made these measurements on several hundred of his yearling bulls that all looked uniform to the eye. However, the test results showed the efficiencies varied from 4 lbs of feed to 1 lb of gain to as much as 12 lbs of feed required to get 1 lb of gain.) This characteristic could have a major impact on the forage required on a ranch to grow and/or maintain cattle – as well as the cost per gain of calves in a feedlot!

Second, keep detailed records on your cattle. As the old industry adage goes: “You can’t improve on things you don’t measure.” Individually tag your cows and calves – with a list of which calves go with which cows. We all think we remember each cow, but usually, we know the very good ones and the very bad ones. Also keep a record of which calves are born first and the birthdate of those early calves. If you have a certified third party verify your

calves as being raised on your ranch and what the oldest and youngest calves are in a group, they can be “Age and Source Verified.” A&S verified calves (now 11% of US beef) bring about a \$30/hd premium to a buyer or a feedlot. Also, slaughtered cattle that are certified as less than 20 months of age can be exported at premium prices. Most records can be kept on a simple spreadsheet and there are several good software programs available (if we would take the time to learn to use them).

A majority of US producers are now using individual identification tags on their calves (see Table 3). The use of electronic tags for national traceability and ease of processing is now up to 20% by producers.

#### **Table 3 – Hide-on Carcass Identification**

(% of hide-on carcasses individually identified by type)

Identification type	2005	2011
Individual electronic tags	3.5	20.1
Individual visual tags	38.7	50.6
Lot visual tags*	63.2	85.7

(\*used by feedlots) Source – NBQA

Third, provide written documentation on your calves. We all know what vaccination protocols we use on our calves - what vaccines we give and when – but we need to write it down and provide it to buyers (do they meet BQA standards?) - it brings higher prices. The NBQA found that

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only 31% of producers use written protocols. Also, provide buyers with information on how and where your calves were raised. This information gives the producers an advantage in the market – with minimum effort required.

And last, if I were asked to describe John Doe, a typical cow/calf operator in Arizona, I would list (non-scientifically) the following characteristics:

- John considers his herd as “crossbred”, but doesn’t control it in a way to maximize heterosis – just using different breed bulls
- John doesn’t know the carcass quality of the calves he produces – he thinks they are “a good looking group of calves”
- John focuses all his efforts only on maximizing weaning weights – not thinking of down-beef-chain markets
- John does not individually identify his cows and calves and has few, if any, written performance records
- John runs his bulls with his cows all year long
- John doesn’t have a written breeding program or calving season
- John buys his bulls based on appearance and not by EPDs or actual measurements on the bulls
- John does not do a complete (physical, fertility and Trich) annual testing of his bulls
- John believes cattle need a “lot of ear” to survive in Arizona
- John has never tried Artificial Insemination
- John has never retained even partial ownership of his calves through a feedlot
- John has no working relationship (and limited knowledge of) feedlots, slaughter houses and marketing outlets

We know that many of these practices are based on our experiences from raising cattle in harsh environments. However, many of the Midwest cattle ranchers (our competition) would question most of these characteristics. Maybe some of our operating methods are just out of date? Are we going to be competitive in tomorrow’s beef markets? It seems to me that the carcass quality of our calves and the understanding of final markets are going to play increasingly important roles in distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful ranches.

So, if you want to raise cattle quality and profits for your ranch: choose your bulls by genetic characteristics, keep detailed records on your cows and calves, provide written health records and other data for your calves, and review if you are using modern/competitive operating practices on your ranch.

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