

Common Ground

It's report card time.



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The kids are back in school, with classes in full swing, which means report card season is just around the corner. For most cattle producers, getting a teacher's report card is a distant memory, but we all still get graded for our work.

For many registered Angus breeders, sale day is their report card. Buyer acceptance of the bulls offered is a strong mark on their program's progress and value.

For commercial cattlemen, it might be the sale day of their feeder calves or finished cattle. Were there more pounds to sell than last year? Were more buyers interested in bidding for their cattle? Did the cattle do better on the grid? All are grades of success.

Grading the industry

While we all need to be graded from time to time, so does the beef industry as a whole. The National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA) is just that. Funded by the Beef Checkoff, the NBQA gives us understanding of where we are doing well and where we can improve.

NBQA researchers go into the packing plants and collect data, as well as interview individuals representing the different segments of the beef supply chain. Over time, the result has been valuable insight on improvements made in the industry, as well as creating a focus for

needed improvement. You can find the full report at www.bqa.org.

An important part of the NBQA is establishing targets. These targets are then compared to industry performance to find lost opportunity. The target quality-grade mix for this most recent audit was 10% Prime, 40% premium Choice (*Certified Angus Beef*[®], or CAB[®]), 35% low-Choice and 15% Select.

For perspective on how much the industry has changed, the ideal mix identified in the 1995 NBQA was 7% Prime, 21% premium Choice, 34% low-Choice and 38% Select. The industry target for Prime and premium Choice combined has moved from 28% in 1995 to 50% today. No doubt, Angus genetics will be needed to profitably hit the target.

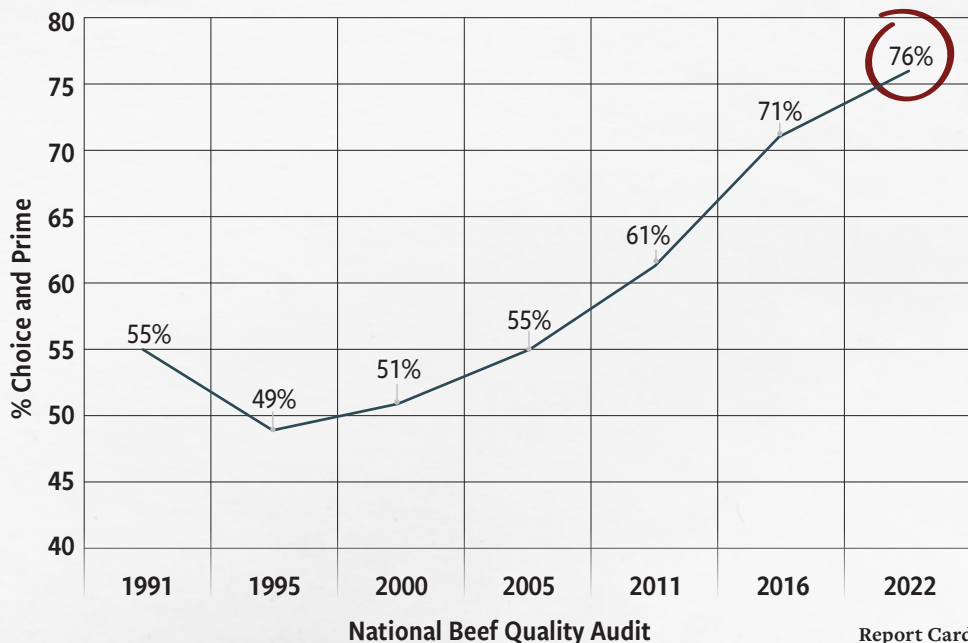
New challenges

While the cooler audits confirm the drastic improvement in quality grade (see Fig. 1), they also document the remarkable increase in carcass weight. Again, for comparison, in the 1995 audit the average carcass weight was 748 pounds (lb.), and 1.7% of carcasses exceeded 950 lb. In the recent audit, 27.2% of the carcasses weighed more than 950 lb. This weight is a combination of improved growth genetics and cattle fed longer and made fatter in the feedyard.

The added weight certainly makes our industry more efficient in terms of pounds produced per cow exposed, but it also introduces carcass defect problems like bruising and reduced mobility. Most of our facilities and trailers were not designed for such big cattle. It is hard to imagine we are going to reduce finished weights in the future, so resolving these issues must be an industry top priority.

While the report card delivered in the recent NBQA was good in terms of product quality, it did identify opportunities for improvement. Fortunately, cattlemen using registered Angus seedstock have more powerful tools at their disposal than at any time in history. The Angus dollar value indexes (\$Values) are built to improve quality grade while simultaneously increasing saleable pounds and red meat yield. Focusing back on the ranch, cattlemen can keep maternal function by using registered Angus genetics that fit their environment. In all, registered Angus genetics are driving industry improvement and helping fill the report card out with straight A's. *ABB*

Fig. 1: Percent Prime and Choice, by NBQA year



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