



Your Link to



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What's keeping your cattle from earning the brand?

You will see the statement in any promotional brochure about the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand: Less than 8% of cattle qualify. It's a fact — in marketing terms, a claim — and one that consumers see as a good thing. But it's a big challenge on the live-cattle side, the Supply Development Division of Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB).

On the surface is perception. Some producers think CAB must be an elite program that pertains to only 8% of their cattle. Indeed, if you look deeper, there's no escaping the fact that 92% of all cattle don't have what it takes. There are even Angus producers who see that the acceptance rate among Angus-type cattle seems frozen at just more than 17%, and they figure they should look out for the other 83%.

Fortunately, an increasing number of producers realize this 25-year-old beef brand represents a stable and profitable target, and they don't have to produce average cattle. They have taken steps to improve herd CAB-acceptance rates to 50% or more, gaining their shares of the \$50 million in annual CAB grid premiums.

Herds from Kansas to Montana have achieved CAB-acceptance rates greater than 75% (see *Best of the Breed*, *Aim High* stories in past issues of the *Angus Beef Bulletin*), but we can only make progress on industry-wide acceptance if we understand why most of the 35.5 million U.S. cattle harvested each year still don't qualify.

Can't meet live criteria

One obvious disqualifier is that 7.5 million of those are cull cows, bulls and other non-fed cattle. That leaves about 28 million fed cattle, of which half would fail to meet the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) GLA-1 specification for CAB. They did not exhibit 51% or more of solid black hair coat, they possessed a neck hump greater than 2 inches (in.), or they lacked adequate beef muscling.

Those unfamiliar with the CAB Program may find the 51% black hair coat requirement arbitrary and unrelated to quality. On the producer level, first impressions of the new program led many to believe they had only to "turn their cattle black" to qualify for CAB and the premiums it would one day command. They failed to consider, as Paul Harvey would say, "the rest of the story."

Meeting the live-animal requirement is only enough to get cattle evaluated in a CAB-licensed packing plant. From the beginning,

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USDA said achieving the CAB brand would require a combination of the black-hide phenotype and eight additional carcass specifications. Three of the carcass specifications are somewhat obvious in the live animal — degree of muscling, neck hump and “A” maturity — but the final call is made in

the cooler. Phenotypic shortcomings can be overcome through genetic selection, and the pool of black-hided cattle has increased every year since the 1980s.

Failing grades

Of the 14 million Angus-type fed cattle harvested last year, 9% passed through smaller, non-licensed plants, some with competing brands. However, 12.7 million

head, or 91%, went through CAB-licensed plants, where 2.2 million qualified for the CAB brand. What kept the other 10.5 million head out?

The 1999 Iowa State University (ISU) analysis of CAB’s 100,000-head carcass database (see, “Why most cattle don’t qualify for CAB,” in the March 2001 *Angus Journal*) showed that marbling of less than a Moderate degree kept 84% of

steers from achieving CAB acceptance. Applied to all cattle evaluated last year, that amounted to 8.8 million head. Another 10% would fail due to incidence of Yield Grade (YG) 4s, and most of those lacked adequate marbling as well.

Marbling is the single largest area of opportunity, and it is highly heritable, but there is no single solution. Given the obvious and growing incentives to achieve CAB acceptance, producers can progress first by making sure their cow herds are Angus-based and not merely black-hided. A recent analysis of Iowa’s 2003 Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity indicated calves known to be more than 75% Angus achieved nearly 40% CAB acceptance, compared to those black calves of less than 25% Angus, which only made 12% (see Table 1).

Angus producers understand that some relatively low-percentage Angus calves make it as CAB, while many registered Angus calves do not. That’s not a contradiction because the specifications were written for commercial cattle, intended to stimulate demand for Angus bulls using market forces. An estimated 80% of CAB-accepted cattle are more than 50% Angus. The market says, if you want more CAB premiums, let expected progeny differences (EPDs) lead you to registered Angus bulls.

The brand demands relatively high-marbling cattle, and selection focus accounts for some of the differences in CAB acceptance. Angus breeders are only now realizing the fruits of added emphasis on marbling as CAB premiums multiplied tenfold in five years, and balanced-trait sires emerged that allow this added focus without detracting from other goals.

Table 1: The effect of percentage of Angus breeding on CAB-acceptance rate^a

Factor	No. of calves	CAB-acceptance rate
% Angus		
0 to 25	244	12.2 ^b
26 to 50	568	16.9 ^b
51 to 75	401	25.4 ^c
76 to 100	1,085	39.5 ^d
Calf sex		
Steers	1,772	16.1 ^b
Heifers	526	30.9 ^c
Season of delivery^e		
Spring	185	13.1 ^b
Summer	685	26.0 ^c
Fall/Winter	1,428	31.4 ^c

^aAcceptance rates are for black calves originating in the southeastern United States in the 2002 Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity. Calves were fed in eight feedlots in Iowa. The model was adjusted for the effect of feedlot. The effect of the number of treatments on CAB-acceptance rate dropped out of this model. A calf was considered black if its hide was 51% or more black.

^{b,c,d} Values within a factor without a common superscript differ ($P < .05$).

^eThe months of delivery represented in each season were: Spring: April, May and June; Summer: July, August and September; Fall/Winter: October, November, December and January.

An analysis of the American Angus Association sire evaluation database six years ago (Schutte, et al., Oklahoma State University, 1998) pointed out that progeny from the top 10% of Angus bulls for carcass value achieved 55% CAB and Prime, while those from the bottom 10% of bulls evaluated made only 15% CAB and Prime. Along with other carcass value factors, the differences amounted to more than a \$200 advantage for calves from the top-value bulls. Those differences have widened the gap, and as the market nudges more producers toward use of top-value bulls, the CAB-acceptance rate should increase significantly.

Some producers have taken genetic selection a step farther. Mike Kasten, Millersville, Mo., stands out as an example. While maintaining a focus on balance, Kasten and his alliance tracked the feeding and carcass grade results of successive, “stacked” generations by marbling EPD. If that sire EPD was 0 or negative, progeny graded 25% CAB; one positive EPD generation means 60% CAB and Prime; two generations made 87% CAB and Prime, while three generations have netted 100% CAB, including 53% Prime.

Maximize by minimizing

If just 40% of the ability to hit the CAB target is genetic, then environmental factors are critical, especially considering that great genetics can be compromised by improper nutrition, health and management.

Texas Ranch to Rail data has demonstrated a \$90-per-head advantage to maintaining good health in cattle destined for finishing, compared to those requiring treatment. The best ways to guard that \$90 and keep high-quality genetics in the running for maximum grid value are to minimize stress and coordinate health and weaning programs with recommendations from your veterinarian and potential feedlot partners. The focus must be on effective vaccination rather than treatment.

Research in Ohio and Illinois shows there are windows of opportunity to enhance grade. There may be a quality grade advantage to weaning a month or two earlier than average, while calves still carry some of the passive immunity from their dams. However, early weaning takes planning, such as preweaning vaccinations and a stress-free but quick step up to a ration that allows gains of 2.5 pounds (lb.) per day or higher.

Implanting need not derail quality goals. According to South Dakota State University (SDSU) research by Robbi Pritchard and Kelly Bruns, the most negative effects on quality grade come from implanting strategies that set cattle up to require more nutrients than they can get from the ration.

It is increasingly clear that, just as management can harm marbling potential, it cannot magically create

marbling beyond the genetic potential. The SDSU work showed finished cattle tend to have the same degree of marbling whether harvested at YG 3.25 or YG 4, and SDSU now aims for a YG 3 end point. If your cattle won't make CAB by the time they reach YG 3.25, extra feeding probably won't help.

In the ISU analysis of the CAB database, 42% of cattle that failed due to

high yield grade had enough marbling. That implies an opportunity to gain up to half a million cattle in the United States each year by sorting to finished end point. The CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP) addresses many of the management focus needs related to hitting the brand's target, and the FLP is building a database that will provide more answers in the future. Most

importantly, these feeding partners share information with you to improve your chances of winning CAB premiums next time.



Editor's Note: *The article, “Why most cattle don't qualify for CAB” can be found online at www.angusjournal.com/ArticlePDF/0301aj_CABISU.pdf.*