

# Packers Add to Beef Quality

by **MIRANDA REIMAN,**  
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Anyone who thinks ranchers and feeders are the only ones who work long hours in the beef business has not talked with a foodservice distributor or thought about a chef burning the midnight oil.

Anyone who thinks beef quality only rides on the production sector's shoulders has not toured a packing plant or learned about aging and cut shops.

There are real people at every link along the beef chain, working to add value, ensure safety and make sure the meat that starts on the farm or ranch gets sold at the price point consumers demand.

During a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) tour of ranch country last fall, foodservice professionals made a stop at the Cargill Meat Solutions plant in Fort Morgan, Colo.



“Seeing every step is so important so they truly understand what an amazing and efficient business the packing plant is,” CAB’s Deanna Walenciak says, describing a packer stop on a ranch country tour CAB provided foodservice professionals.

“After the ranch visits [the attendees] were bubbling over with excitement about the down-to-earth, passionate people they met — and when we got to

## **Beef’s a Trip**

This article is part 1 of a two-part summary offering highlights of a recent 30-day blog series explaining every step in the beef production chain. For more on the role of each sector of the beef business, search “Beef’s a Trip” on the Black Ink Blog at [www.blackinkwithcab.com](http://www.blackinkwithcab.com).



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the packing plant, we found the same type of people,” says Deanna Walenciak, CAB director of marketing and leader of that excursion. “That made such an impression.”

Cargill’s Nicole Johnson-Hoffman welcomed the group and even told them to give her employees a “thumbs up” as a way to let them know their work is appreciated.

“Seeing every step is so important so they truly understand what an amazing and efficient business the packing plant is — to see the overwhelming amount of skilled work it takes to get it from animal to meat,” Walenciak says.

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South Dakota rancher Rich Blair once complained to a packer-buyer, saying producers are never told what kind of animal packers want. “He said, ‘Yeah we have. We’ve laid our grids out there. We’ve told you what we wanted.’”

“I thought, ‘Holy smokes, he did,’” Blair says. “He told me he didn’t care if they were blue or green, but he’ll pay me if they grade Choice, and he’ll pay me if they’re CABs and Primes.”

### **Maintaining potential**

Procurement strategies and price signals tell producers they want quality, but once the ranchers and feeders have set them up for success, it’s up to the packers to maintain that potential.

“You only get one chance to handle them right,” says Phil Bass, CAB meat scientist.

Animal handling when the cattle arrive — things like letting them rest and not commingling groups so they have

to establish new pecking orders — can impact stress level. That ultimately makes a difference in the number of dark cutters and meat tenderness.

Chilling is important for food safety, Bass says, so packers have to do it quickly, but not too quickly. If they do, a phenomena known as “cold shortening” can cause the muscle to contract, and that hurts tenderness, too.

“Then probably one of the most important steps is assigning the right grades on the carcasses when they get to the sales cooler,” says Bass. “When somebody buys a piece of Choice beef, it better really be Choice.”

From a packer, beef can take different paths to the consumer, to a further processor, distributor, or directly to retail. People load the trucks; drivers make sure

beef is kept at the right temperature until delivery; processors take great care in aging it.

Ranchers depend on hundreds of people to make sure their product shines on its final stage: the plate.

**Editor’s Note:** *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB).*

