Cattlemen stressing nutrition in beef

We had a visit last week from the folks from the Louisiana Cattlemen's Association. Each year we're treated to a stop on the goodwill tour made by the Cattlemen's Queen and officers of the organization.

Charles Broussard of Kaplan, who currently serves as the association's president, escorted this year's queen, Candy Crow of Natchitoches (Broussard joked that after spending a few days in Acadiana, Crow should be spelling her name C-r-e-a-u-x).

Like other Cattlemen's Queens we've met, Crow is from a family that raises cattle; her father's herd of about 20 head is typical of many of Louisiana's cattlemen.

Louisiana's cattlemen are feeling the effects of the hard winter; it's estimated that about 20 percent of this year's calves were lost to the cold. That's a hard winter on top of several years of other problems, including soft prices, rising transportation costs, and eroding margins.

There has been one bright spot for Louisiana cattlemen recently, though. A meat-packing plant has opened just across the Mississippi border and is processing Louisiana cattle, cutting transportation costs. But that plant is only set up to grind hamburger from cattle fed out on grass.

To produce prime cuts, Louisiana cattle are shipped to the Midwest where they are “fed out” on grain, consuming about eight pounds of grain for each pound of beef produced. The Midwest's abundance of grain makes it the hub of meat-packing operations since it is cheaper to move a 1000-lb. steer than thousands of pounds of grain.

But moving those cattle is by no means cheap. A Louisiana cattlemen can either sell directly to a feeder who will discount the transportation cost into the price he pays the cattlemen; or, if the cattlemen chooses, he can keep ownership and pay for the transportation costs and feeding costs himself, trading the risk of a lower price for the potential of a higher one.

Either way, any Louisiana cattlemen raising cattle to be fed out pays for transportation, which is not cheap. Beef prices at the retail level have been steady or slightly declining in the last few years, eroding the small possibilities for profits that existed.

While cattlemen have fought with their balance sheets on one hand, they've been battling on another front as well. Changing tastes and an intense attraction of other projects has cut into the numbers of cattlemen. Bob Felkner, the association's executive secretary, says that when he came into the association in 1975 there were 42,000 cattle producers in Louisiana. Now there are about 15,000. “What we're down to now,” he says, “is the hardcore cattle producer.”

Broussard reports that cattlemen are producing leaner animals; even fed-out cattle are being fed out for shorter periods. “We found out we were putting this fat on the cuts,” he says, “and the consumer was cutting it off and throwing it out.”

Vermilion Parish, where Broussard has his cattle, is the biggest cattle farming parish in the state; statewide there are about 1.3 million head, representing a $500 million annual business.

Still, it's a business that's tough to stay in. Cost problems, the need to respond to consumer changes, and the attraction of other projects has cut into the profits that existed.

Broussard says that cattlemen are responding by changing the way they promote the product. “We used to talk about how good it tasted and how nice it was to treat yourself to a steak,” he says. “Now, we emphasize the nutritional value of beef.”

The changing conditions spurred cattlemen to conduct their own research into the product. The results, Broussard says, surprised them. “We weren't cognizant of how nutritious beef was,” he says.

Broussard carries around results of a U.S. Dept. of Agriculture study touting beef's riches in protein, vitamin B-12, iron, and other essentials. A part of the study he is emphatic about is the measure of cholesterol in beef compared to other foods.

“The people stepping on us were the chicken people,” he says. According to the study results Broussard carries, there are 73 mg. of cholesterol in a three ounce serving of cooked lean beef, compared to 75 mg. in three ounces of roast turkey; 76 mg. in three ounces of skinned chicken; and 52 mg. in three ounces of flounder.

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