

Ranchers learn from the experts about beef quality management

Along with ushering in a new year, the winter days of January can provide ranchers with additional down time to take advantage of learning opportunities offered through local meetings and events geared toward optimizing a ranch's production potential.

Beef 706, held recently at Texas A&M University in College Station, was one event where upwards of 25 members of the Texas Small Farmers and Ranchers CBO spent two days learning hands-on about beef quality management. Beef 706 is sponsored by the Texas Beef Council and Texas A&M University, whose beef cattle and meat science specialists are the instructors.

"It was a great opportunity and feeling to be invited to one of the cutting-edge universities with one of the most state-of-the-art training centers in the U.S. when it comes to agriculture and animal science programs. Our members attended workshops throughout the year, but Beef 706 allowed them to have a birds-eye view of what it takes to produce quality beef for the market place," said Wade Ross, state director of the Texas Small Farmers and Ranchers CBO.

Classroom sessions included information on U.S. standards for carcass quality grades and how to visually determine quality and yield grades on live and harvested cattle. Attendees also heard about the type of finished steers and heifers that meet commercial marketplace demands.

A unique aspect of Beef 706 is the hands-on learning components. The group was able to view two live head of cattle and evaluate their quality and yield grades. The cattle were then harvested and their carcasses hung for the group to see exactly what's under the hide. They were taught how to determine factors such as the quality of muscle or meat, the percent of carcass fat, and the indicators that can help determine the physiological age of an animal.

"It is very informative for our producers to know that just because a cow is black it does not mean it is a quality grade of beef product. Producers must know the factors affecting yield grades. It begins with genetics, but we must put it all together to create a quality product with mom's milk, quality forage and a good management plan in place," Ross said. "We need to be able to produce a quality grade of beef product that will yield between 1 and 5 grades for USDA inspection. So when 'Beef is What's for Dinner', consumers have very high expectations of the beef products we raise for their dinner plate."

Partnerships with associations such as the Texas Beef Council and universities like Texas A&M continue to help CBO members in their day-to-day agricultural pursuits. Another strong CBO partner is the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service who works alongside members on establishing conservation and forage management practices on their lands. Ross believes this systems approach to forage and beef quality management can lead to success.

"One of the important elements of ranching is you must be a grass grower. Cattle are foragers, they are designed to forage on grass. So, if you don't start with quality forage, producing quality beef can be difficult, as well as expensive," Ross added. "So, begin with high-quality pastures and test often for your soil quality levels. Keep good management records and the feedlots will finish them off for you with a quality carcass for the market place."

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