

# Cattle care guidelines target producers, consumers

BY TODD DOMER

The previously foregone conclusion that producers provide sound animal care is about to march into the public spotlight. In response to a cooperative effort between the Food Marketing Institute (supermarkets) and the National Council of Chain Restaurants to establish animal care guidelines, cattle producers took the matter into their own hands. By doing so, the industry now has guidelines written by producers, animal scientists and animal handling experts as opposed to what could have been mandates from activists and the government.

"If we didn't do it, it was apparent someone outside the industry would," said Hamilton rancher Mike Collinge, a member of the Cattle Care Working Group appointed a year ago by NCBA President Wythe Willey.

Heightened consumer awareness of how food is produced prompted NCBA to review and update existing cattle care guidelines. Collinge was one of 19 individuals assigned to make revisions that help enhance consumer confidence and give the industry an opportunity to continue increasing beef demand. Other Kansans involved in the process included Circle E Feedlot Manager David Lowe of Potwin, Kansas State University veterinarian Mark Spire and K-State animal care specialist Janice Swanson.

According to Lowe, the group had no problem agreeing on good husbandry practices. Science and common sense are the basis for most of the recommendations. Lowe said the biggest challenge was coming up with terminology to describe different science-based animal

care procedures to consumers.

The guidelines are worded with both audiences in mind. For instance, while ranchers benefit from knowing cows should have a body condition score (BCS) of at least four before the calving season, consumers learn that during periods of prolonged drought and widespread feed shortages, the average BCS of cows within a herd may decline temporarily.

In the actual document, the full litany of welfare issues is prefaced by a producer code of cattle care. The code specifically states persons who mistreat animals will not be tolerated.

Hot-button issues such as castration, dehorning and branding are addressed head-on. Recommendations in these areas may or may not present new information for producers, but specifically reassure consumers these practices are for the animal's well-being. Advice geared toward producers suggests castration be accomplished prior to 120 days of age or when calves weigh less than 500 lbs. A similar suggestion applies to dehorning.

The guidelines acknowledge permanent identification can be an important management tool. Hot or freeze branding is labeled as "necessary" under certain conditions, including remote locations and communal grazing arrangements. Ear tags are suggested as an alternative when cattle are housed in close quarters and can be checked readily. Jaw brands are strictly discouraged, while ear notching is considered acceptable. In

## Guidelines for care and handling of beef cattle

prepared by NCBA Cattle Care Working Group

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To obtain a copy of the guidelines, call the KLA office (785) 273-5115 or go to [www.kla.org](http://www.kla.org).

conclusion, the use of emerging technology, such as electronic ear tags and retinal scans, is encouraged when practical.

Other recommendations deal with transporting "downer" cattle, the use of prods and cattle dogs, euthanasia and facility design.

Part of the industry "roll-out" will be to incorporate the guidelines into state and national beef quality assurance programs. From a public perspective, the guidelines will be shared with the supermarket and restaurant trade groups.

Initially, the direct effect on producers will be minimal. Collinge said the guidelines are strictly voluntary and do not represent a major departure from standard operating procedure for responsible ranchers and feeders. The impact likely will increase in the near future as supermarkets and restaurants demand more accountability from suppliers. Initially, this could mean self-audits for producers, with independent verification of animal care eventually a near certainty.

"This (audits) isn't as far off as some people think," said Lowe. **ks**