

Cattle Business in Mississippi – November/ December 2007 “Stocker Cents” article

Mississippi Cattlemen are Profiting from “Natural Beef”

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Last month, beef cattle producers in southern Mississippi sold loads of 700-weight feeder steers to natural beef programs for \$115/cwt. The calves were sent to Gregory Feedlots, Inc. who supplies finished cattle to Meyer Natural Angus. The Meyer Natural Angus program requires cattle providers to sign an affidavit verifying that the cattle have not been treated with antibiotics, administered any growth implants or synthetic hormones, or fed ionophores or animal byproducts. These cattle must have also been born and raised in the USA, be at least 50% Red and/or Black Angus genetics, display no Brahman or dairy influence, and ultimately be harvested at less than 30 months of age. Cloned animals or progeny of cloned animals do not qualify.

Another requirement for the Meyer Natural Angus program is that the cattle are raised under the standards of the “Certified Humane Raised & Handled Label”. This additional label indicates that the cattle came from a facility that lets them engage in their natural behaviors; gave them sufficient space, shelter and gentle handling to limit stress; and gave them an ample supply of fresh water and healthy diet without added antibiotics or hormones. It is interesting to note that partners of this program include the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and the Humane Society of the United States. Being indirectly associated with these groups should be a consideration when deciding whether to market cattle in these programs.

The actual definition of natural beef is different depending on the agency and sector of the market. For instance, the USDA describes natural beef simply as a product that is minimally processed and has no artificial ingredients. However, the common market definition of natural beef is a product of cattle that were raised without antibiotic treatment, exogenous hormones, or fed animal by-products. Each of these added label claims are substantiated by third-party verification. Some other label claims that are often associated with natural beef include humanely raised, breed verification, and grass fed.

It should be noted that, even though some of the label claims are similar, natural beef is different than organic beef. The USDA National Organic Program Standards state that, to be labeled as organic beef, it must have been born and raised on certified organic pasture, never received antibiotics, never received growth-promoting hormones, fed only certified organic grains and grasses, must have had unrestricted access to outdoor

facilities, and received humane treatment. While some of the natural beef programs incorporate some of these practices into their requirements, the two labeling programs are quite different.

When considering whether to raise natural feeder or stocker cattle, there are a several management changes that will have to be made. One of the best ways to guard against sick cattle is to be diligent in maintaining a proper preconditioning and vaccination protocol. Calves that have been properly weaned in a low-stress manner will experience less morbidity and mortality. If at some point calves in a natural program require antibiotic treatment, they can simply be marketed by conventional means. Some parasite control is allowed but should be cleared by the intended buyer before application. Nutritional management will also have to be changed from traditional methods to comply with natural branded programs. For instance, creep feeding or background supplementation must be done without addition of ionophores or animal byproducts to the rations. Another difference between natural and organic beef is that genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Feedstuffs from GMOs are suitable as for natural beef programs whereas the USDA National Organic Program prohibits feeding GMOs.

The demand for natural beef is driven by consumers that want a product they conceive as wholesome and humanly raised. Because cattle in natural beef programs usually display decreased performance during backgrounding and finishing, they require more input. More input then leads to higher prices for the consumer and offsets some of the demand. Furthermore, some beef products from natural branded programs are less palatable to consumers that are accustomed to conventionally raised beef. Other market drivers include brand recognition or loyalty and a perception of social responsibility.

Natural beef programs are a way for producers, who have the resources to raise cattle under these regulations, to increase revenue in a niche market. However, current decreased efficiencies due to restricted use of antibiotics and ionophores will likely preclude this type of management system from becoming the industry norm. On a final note, marketing these products as wholesome, healthy, and humanely handled is completely accurate but should be done without inadvertently damaging the reputation of conventionally raised beef.