University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension

Extension

1982

G82-590 Feeder Cattle Grades

Keith E. Gilster
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, kgilster1@unl.edu

H. Dwight Loveday
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/extensionhist

Part of the Agriculture Commons, and the Curriculum and Instruction Commons

NebGuide

Published by Cooperative Extension, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Feeder Cattle Grades

This NebGuide describes the ten USDA feeder cattle grades.

H. Dwight Loveday, Extension Meats Specialist
Keith E. Gilster, Extension Livestock Evaluation Specialist

- Frame Size
- Thickness

The purpose of the USDA Feeder Cattle Grades is to sort feeder cattle into similar groups that will facilitate their selling and buying. These grades can also be used for sorting feeder cattle into similar outcome groups in a feedlot. Differences in frame size and muscle thickness score are the basis for the USDA Feeder Cattle Grades.

Feeder cattle are given a grade score that is coded for both frame size (large, medium and small) and thickness (1, 2 and 3). For example, a large frame, thick feeder steer would have a feeder grade of "L-1," indicating a large frame, number 1 muscle thickness. Feeder grades consisting of frame size and thickness will only apply to normal, healthy animals. The grade "Inferior" will be used for cattle that are not expected to perform normally in their present state. Examples of "Inferior" grade would be feeder cattle that are unthrifty because of mismanagement, disease, parasitism, lack of feed (*Figure 1*) or "double-muscled" cattle (*Figure 2*).
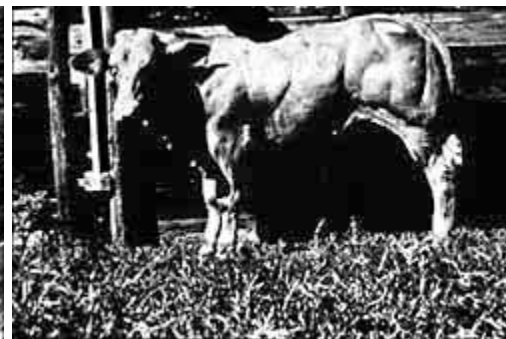

Figure 1.   Figure 2.

Frame Size

Frame size refers to the animal's skeletal size--its height and body length in relation to its age. Frame size is highly correlated with the live weight at which an animal will produce a carcass of a given degree of fatness or quality grade. Frame size relates to the slaughter weight to which an animal must be fed before it will attain U.S. Choice grade. Generally, the larger the frame size, the longer the feeding period and the greater the live weight necessary to grade U.S. Choice. However, a higher rate of gain may be achieved from the larger frame cattle.

The feeder cattle grade standards identify three frame sizes--*large, medium* and *small*. Descriptions of each of these frame scores are as follows:
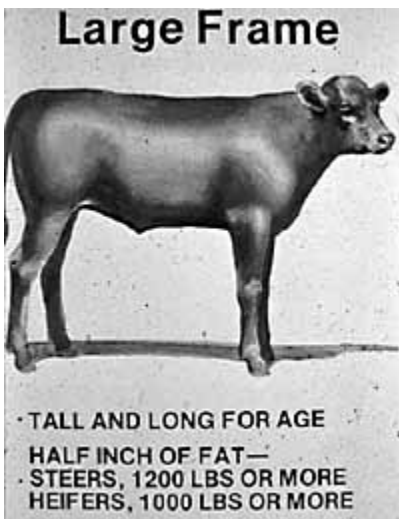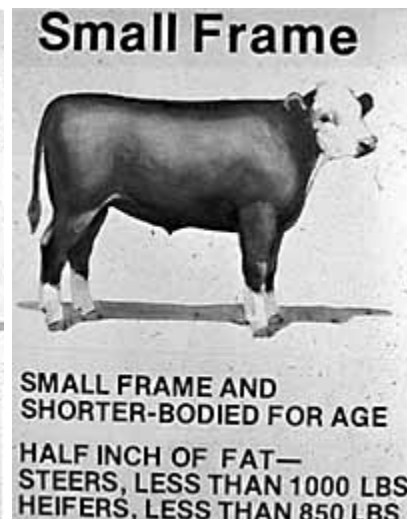

Figure 3.   **Figure 4.**   **Figure 5.**

Large frame (L)

Large frame feeder cattle have large skeletons and are tall and long bodied for their age (*Figure 3*). Large frame feeder steers and heifers would generally produce a U.S. Choice grade carcass (usually 0.5 inch of fat at the 12th rib) at about 1,200 pounds or more for steers and about 1,000 pounds or more for heifers.

Medium frame (M)

Medium frame feeder cattle have slightly large frames and are slightly long bodied for their age (*Figure 4*). At about 0.5 inch of fat cover, medium frame steers would weigh between 1,000 and 1,200 pounds and heifers between 850 and 1,000 pounds.

Small frame (S)

Small frame feeder cattle are shorter bodied and shorter in height than medium frame feeder cattle (*Figure 5*). When at about 0.5 inch external fat cover (approximately U.S. Choice grade), small frame steers generally weigh less than 1,000 pounds and small frame heifers will finish at less than 850 pounds.

Figure 6 shows examples of small, medium and large frame feeder calves (left to right).

Although variations in frame size are evident in all breeds and crossbreeds, breed types do differ in the general range of their frame sizes. In evaluating feeder cattle for frame size, variation

in frame size among breeds must be taken into consideration. For example, large frame feeder calves from small mature size cattle and small frame feeder calves from large mature size cattle might both be considered medium in frame size.

Figure 6.

Thickness

Thickness indicates the muscle to bone ratio and the ribeye size of the cattle. Feeder cattle grade standards assume a constant fat thickness in evaluating thickness of feeder cattle. When feeder cattle of similar age and frame score are fed to the sane degree of fatness, thicker feeder cattle will have a higher ratio of muscle to bone and a more desirable yield grade. Degree of thickness is designated by the numbers *1, 2* and *3*, with *1* being most desirable. Thickness scores are illustrated in *Figures 7* to *9*. Description of thickness scores are given below.
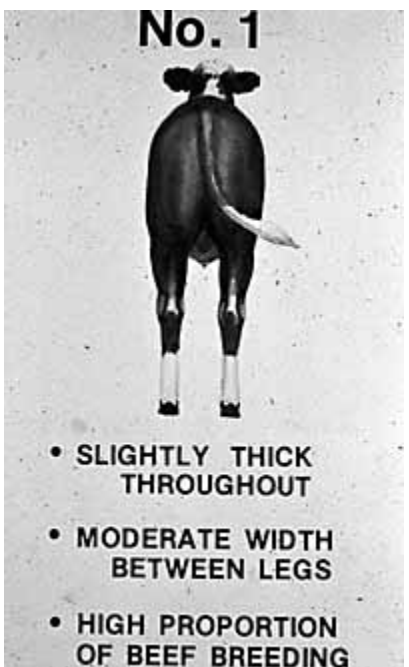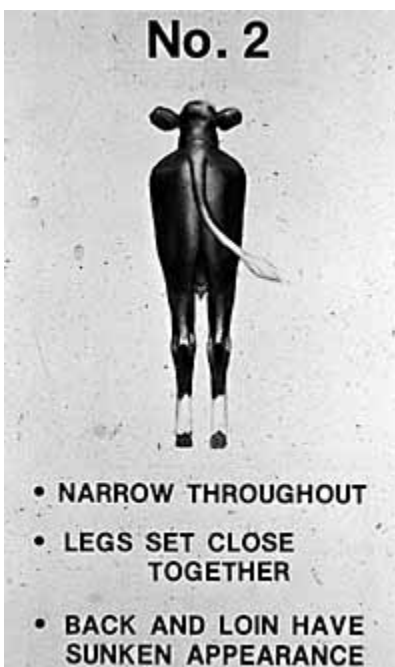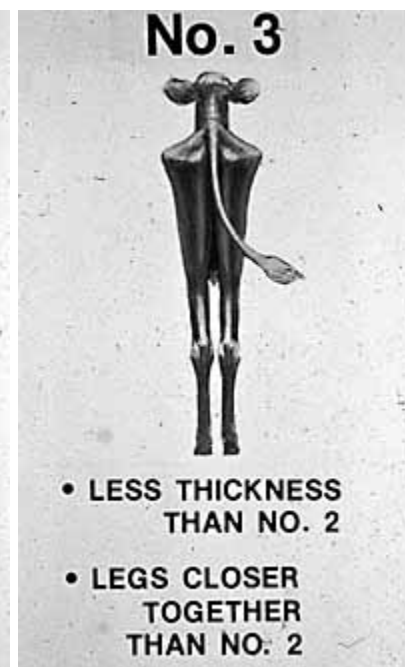

| Figure 7. | Figure 8. | Figure 9. |

Thickness No. 1
> These cattle are thrifty and slightly thick throughout (*Figure 7*). They are slightly wide through their chest, and slightly thick and full through the back and loin. The rounds and forearms are also slightly thick. Number 1 thickness cattle have their legs set widely apart and usually show a high proportion of beef breeding. "Double muscled" cattle are not eligible for this grade--they would be graded U.S. Inferior.

Thickness No. 2
> These cattle are narrower throughout (*Figure 8*). They are narrower through their chest, over the

back and loin and through the rounds, and their legs are generally set close together.

Thickness No. 3

Feeder cattle included in the No. 3 grade are thrifty animals that have less thickness than the minimum requirements specified for the No. 2 grade (*Figure 9*).

Figure 10 shows two feeder steers of the same frame score, but the steer on the left has a thickness score of No. 1 and the steer on the right a thickness score of No. 2.

In summary, there are nine USDA feeder cattle grades for thrifty animals and one "Inferior" grade for unthrifty animals. The thrifty feeder animals are classified on frame size (large, medium and small) and thickness scores (1, 2 and 3). A feeder animal classified large - 1 (L-1) would be a thrifty animal that has a large skeletal makeup and is thickly muscled. A medium - 2 (M-2) feeder calf would have less body height and length and would be thinner in its muscle expression. However, this calf would be expected to reach 0.5 inch of fat (or U.S. Choice grade) in a shorter period of time and at a lighter weight. The "Inferior" grade would include feeder cattle that are unthrifty because of mismanagement or health reasons, or are "double muscled."

Figure 10.

For more information: USDA AMS Quality Standards are also described at the USDA Web site. The documents are available in Adobe's Portable Document Format (PDF).