

SUBJECT:  
Is branding the way to go?

In the November edition of the Newsletter I mentioned that the Meat Conference of 7 November will discuss the issue of: "Relevance of the South African Carcass Classification Systems". The conference was highly informative as to meat research results and successful in terms of lively discussions round the topic of whether the classification system should change or not. Since there were strong opinions for and against it was decided to refer the issue to a committee for further debate and recommendations.

One of the arguments for change is that the classification systems only allows for classification of meat based on age and fat covering, and cannot guarantee persistency in attributes such as tenderness, consistency and overall quality of the product of a particular class of meat. This immediately put the question on the table if stakeholders do not expect more of the classification systems than what it was intended for originally. SAMIC states that "meat classification provides a sound basis for:

- Meat traders to describe their carcasses in simple terms for purchasing
- The use of variety in the market for optimal consumer satisfaction
- Price differences
- Determination of sales prices"  
(<http://www.samic.co.za/downloads/Redmeat.pdf>).

Although there may be arguments that addition of other attributes apart from age and fat covering, such as conformation, could improve the description, it is clear from the SAMIC interpretation that the classification systems were not designed to guarantee persistency in meat quality. If the number of variables where the variation is not additive, as discussed by the meat researchers, are taken into account it is most unlikely that a single model of quality prediction will ever be developed.

For example: carcasses in the A-age category are the preferred choice because of tenderness and fat cover. However, tenderness, colour, juiciness, marbling etc can be influenced severely by electrical stimulation,  $\beta$ -agonists (e.g. Zilpaterol), breed, aging potential, display cabinet etc, even before poor cooking methods kill all positives! So, how do we get to the point of consistency in quality?

This may be an unrealistic ideal, but we should be able to improve if control throughout the value chain is imposed. To my way of thinking branding may be an option. Why? Because with branding a product is envisaged with particular defined characteristics which are decided upon and upheld from production, to processing, to retailing. For example, if consistent tenderness is to be emphasized narrow guidelines can be prescribed such as the age of the animal, its breed, the method of feeding, the method of transport and slaughter (limiting stress, electrical stimulation), post-slaughter handling (e.g. aging), method of display etc. A further advantage is that a branding system is a traceability system to make sure that everybody in the value chain takes responsibility for his/her functions in the deal. Being a traceability system, good management practices (e.g. the Code of Best Practices) can be added to emphasize bio-security, animal health and welfare, and environmental sustainability. In association, I am also of the opinion that producers should impose more "control" of the marketing of their product. For example, "grass fed" often comes to the fore. The possible negatives to tenderness can be addressed in the way explained above. The negatives associated with yellow fat cannot, because it is a retailer/consumer perception. So, the onus is on the producer to refute the perception by promotion and other means. In so doing, "grass fed" can become a successful branded product. ■

*This article is supported in cooperation with the Red Meat Producers Organisation.*

