

Cow Camp Chatter

I have a beef about my beef purchase!

Ron Torell, Long-Standing Educator and Advocate of Agriculture

There is a growing popularity for consumer direct sales of locally grown, grass finished, hormone-free, all-natural freezer beef. Many consumers, however, are in the dark when it comes to understanding the yield loss of a 1200 lb grass finished steer after harvesting. The entire steer which has been cut and wrapped to specifications for a family of four will fit into about eight cardboard boxes once it has been harvested, aged and processed. Baffled by this, consumers want to know what happened to the rest of their beef.

THE CONSUMER PURCHASED:

One Live Weight Steer	1200 lb.
Drop or offal of rumen fill, hide, internals, viscera	<u>-540 lb.</u>
Chilled carcass yield after drop/offal (55% - 65% of live weight):	660 lb.
Saw cutting loss of 1.0 to 2.0%	-12 lb.
Trim and waste from bones, connective tissue, moisture, etc.	<u>-171 lb.</u>
Estimated pounds of beef left for wrapping	477 lb.

THE CONSUMER RECEIVED:

Retail Cuts:

Steaks	140 lb.
Roasts	119 lb.
Brisket, misc. cuts	22 lb.
Short Ribs	32 lb.
Stew Meat	32 lb.
Ground Beef	<u>132 lb.</u>
Estimated pounds of beef cut & wrapped from 1200 live steer:	477 lb.

In the above example, the consumer paid \$1440 for a 1200 lb. live steer at \$1.20/lb. On top of this an additional \$500 fee was incurred for harvesting, cutting, wrapping and transportation. After processing, the consumer received approximately 477 pounds of meat resulting in a total cost of \$4.06/lb. for what amounted to 40% of the original live weight purchase. Where did the other 60% go? Disappointed with these numbers, the consumer felt cheated. Understanding how the harvesting process works once the live steer is delivered to the plant is essential in order for consumers to walk away satisfied with their freezer beef purchase.

The drop or offal of an animal includes the rumen fill, hide, and internal organs or viscera totaling roughly 40-45% of a 1200 lb live steer. The majority of the offal value comes from the hide. The packing plant owns the drop/offal of the animal which is generally valued between \$7.00 - \$14.00/cwt. This is used by the plant to offset packing house operating costs. The rumen fill stays on the harvest floor and has no value. Chilling the carcass for 24 hours and/or dry-aging, hanging carcasses for an extended period of time (up to 14 days) in order to add tenderness and eating satisfaction to the meat, results in a moisture loss of 1-4% of the carcass. Generally there is also a 1-2% saw cutting loss.

When purchasing a freezer beef, many consumers assume there will be more steaks, porterhouse and filet mignon, less hamburger, and few, if any, soup bones. They expect to have several tri-tips and none of the tough arm or check roasts. They fail to realize that there are a limited number of favorite cuts from one beef. Rib eye and T-bone steaks originate from what is called the “middle meats.” This area consists of the rib and loin section of the carcass and represents the most valuable portion of the animal.

As an industry we seldom have a problem selling the middle meats, especially if the animal is a choice or higher quality grade. The quantity of middle meat steaks depends on the cutting specifications. If a rib roast is desired then there won't be as many rib eye steaks. The filet mignon is the same muscle that makes up a good portion of porterhouse steaks so consumers must decide which cut they prefer. There are only two tri-tip roasts on an animal originating from the bottom sirloin. The top of the sirloin yields sirloin steaks and roasts.

Hamburger is a great outlet for trim and lower-valued muscle cuts that can't be marketed in other ways. Grinding hamburger also offers a place to market a portion of the fat waste that is inherent with fed cattle. Soup bones are essentially the same story. It is unfortunate that other portions of the animal cannot be converted into equal quality and value as the middle meats. Our Beef Checkoff dollars, however, are working on doing just that. Through muscle profiling value is being added to lower end cuts such as the chuck making this portion of the animal more palatable and desirable to the consumer.

The figures set forth in this article are used as an example only. Actual figures realized from other harvested animals may vary greatly depending upon animal conformation, frame size, degree of muscling, fat cover, age at harvest, sex of animal, cutting techniques and individual specifications. Grass finished beef generally yields a lighter carcass in relation to live weight compared to beef on a grain finish program. This is primarily due to the reduced amount of external fat cover on the grass finished animal. When all is said and done, the consumer can expect to receive approximately 40% of edible product off a harvested grass finished 1200 lb live steer.