

## GIVING PACKERS WHAT THEY WANT: A HASSLE-FREE PROCESS

Packers want cattle that present minimal challenges throughout the entire harvest process, starting from when they exit the truck to when they are processed into high-quality beef products. Step one: packers want an ambulatory animal. This means the animal should be able to walk off the truck and enter the pen system without issue.

Once the animal is in the holding pen, packers prefer it remains calm and able to rest without complications. When it's time for the animal to move to the restrainer for stunning and exsanguination, packers need it to be hassle-free. Every issue – whether it's related to soundness, behavior or health – adds unnecessary labor and reduces the overall efficiency of the plant.

From a husbandry standpoint, packers prefer animals that are clean and free of contaminants, like mud or manure on the hide. Cleanliness is not related to the animal's type but rather how well it's managed and handled in the feedlot. In fact, dirty animals can result in costly trimming and a lower yield of usable product. Any issues that force workers to trim parts of the carcass not only add labor costs, but they also lead to losses in the amount of salable meat.

### Color and carcass size: Do they matter?

While dominant black-hided animals may qualify for premium programs, color alone doesn't define quality. Rather, packers want beef-on-dairy animals that can match marbling scores similar to high-quality native-sourced steers and heifers.

And size? That's becoming an increasing challenge. Some beef-on-dairy crosses are now as large (or larger) than purebred Holsteins, reaching 1900 pounds or more. While packers are adjusting infrastructure to accommodate bigger animals, oversized carcasses slow line speeds and increase labor.

### The biggest challenge with beef-on-dairy animals

Animals free of disease, specifically, those without lung health issues, liver abscesses or bruises are sought after by packers. Disease or injury on the carcass can lead to reductions in marketable products, especially when parts like the liver, tongue, heart or other organs become unfit for sale.

Liver abscesses contribute to an estimated \$900 million in annual losses.<sup>7</sup> These losses are primarily driven by the decreased value of the affected organs and the increased costs associated with handling and disposing of these compromised animals. This figure doesn't account for additional financial impacts such as the downtime for the loss of productivity due to health-related delays or the downgrade of meat products.

With the right management at the calf ranch, liver abscess challenges can be reduced. While often viewed as a finishing-phase issue, liver abscesses are influenced by the calf's earliest experiences, particularly nutrition and health during the first few months of life. Calves that experience stress, inconsistent feeding or poor gut development are more likely to face digestive challenges later on, increasing the risk for abscesses when they reach high-concentrate diets in the feedlot.

Beyond feeding, overall calf comfort and cleanliness matter. Ensuring clean pens, providing adequate bedding and limiting overcrowded housing can all contribute to stress



and immune suppression. When calf ranches get the basics right – feeding, housing and health – the benefits echo down the line. This may result in fewer liver abscesses, more streamlined harvest process, better feedlot efficiency and stronger overall returns on these cattle.

### Ensuring packer preferences are met

Communication between beef processors and cattle producers is critical to ensuring that packers' preferences are consistently met. Producers need to engage with packers regularly to understand what is working and what is not, making adjustments to management practices as needed. Too often, feedback

only comes when a problem arises, which means there may be tens of thousands of cattle that don't meet the ideal specifications before the issue is communicated.

Producers are encouraged to regularly evaluate the quality of their cattle and actively engage with processors to understand how animals are performing at harvest. Ongoing communication helps both sides make informed decisions to improve cattle management, animal health and carcass consistency. These efforts contribute to a stable, profitable supply of beef-on-dairy cattle that benefits dairies, feedyards and packers alike – reinforcing the value of collaboration across the supply chain.



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