PRODUCER AND WHOLESALER ATTITUDES TO BULL BEEF

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The production of beef from young bulls has become widely accepted in continental Europe (Rhodes 1978), however in Australia castrated animals continue to be used for meat production. To determine the possible reasons for the lack of acceptance of bull beef as an alternative production system in temperate Australia, questionnaires were sent to beef producers and wholesalers in 1979.

Information on production and attitudes to bull beef were sought from 200 producers (each with >100 breeding cows) on the New England Tablelands of N.S.W. and from 50 wholesalers operating in N.S.W. and Victoria and selected at random from the AMIC list of licensed exporters.

The properties surveyed averaged 1852 ha in size with over 50 per cent of the land area classified as pasture improved. Carrying capacity averaged 1 beast/2 ha with a tendency for the proportion of cattle to be higher on lower carrying capacity properties. The majority of properties reared Hereford or Angus stock to slaughter at 15-30 months. Only a small proportion (16%) of producers had raised bulls for beef; 70 per cent of these finding the enterprise economically "successful". These producers tended to have higher carrying capacities (0.46 vs 0.35 beasts/ha) and a greater proportion of improved pasture than those who had not found bull-beef production a viable enterprise.

Producers listed three major reasons for lack of acceptance of bull beef: (1) Management difficulties (67%) which included fence damage, the need for early separation of sexes and difficulty in yard handling. Producers with more than two years experience in rearing young bulls did not list handling as a problem and also reported fewer herd injuries (4.0 vs 8.8%) than their less experienced counterparts (P<0.01). The level of injury to steers (2%) was similar for both producer groups; (2) Buyer resistance (39%), the majority of experienced producers recognising this problem; (3) Finishing difficulties (22%).

Wholesalers who returned the questionnaire contributed to 10 per cent of Australia's beef export trade and 40 per cent of Australia's bull kill. Bulls (mostly cull for age animals) represented only 6.3% of slaughtered stock. The majority of wholesalers (82%) indicated a preference for steers over bulls, at least for animals of carcase weights >250 kg. Only 17 per cent indicated such preference for carcase weights of <250 kg.

Problems of bull beef listed by wholesalers included lack of finish, dark colour and toughness as predominant factors (P<0.001) with cut distribution, dressing percentage and bruising as minor concerns. Toughness was not listed as a problem in meat from young, lightweight (<250 kg) bulls. All wholesalers saw bull beef as having distinct advantages in total yield and in manufacturing quality.

These surveys indicate that resistance of producers and buyers to bull beef does exist. Producers' main concerns relate to management problems while wholesalers see bull meat as of poor quality for the local retail market. Whether these concerns are well founded for young, lightweight bulls (i.e. <18 months old or 250 kg carcase weight) needs further examination.


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