

The War on Fat: Part II of II

How Low to Go?

How lean is lean enough?

Are there still opportunities when thinking about lean beef? Yes, industry experts agree, but not necessarily in the direction it has taken during the past 40 years.

“We’re now to the point we just can’t get any leaner,” says Jeff Savell of Texas A&M University. “Even if the only grade eaten by consumers was Select, it wouldn’t change fat intake (by Americans) appreciably.”

The beef checkoff’s Shalene McNeill agrees. “Because today’s beef is so closely trimmed, there’s not much more progress we can make toward leaner product,” she says, “but the availability of lean beef cuts is extremely important in helping consumers feel better about beef.”

The industry’s message on lean could hardly be more positive. Today more than 38 cuts, when cooked and trimmed of visible fat, have been shown to fit the USDA definition of lean, which is less than 10 grams of total fat, less than or equal to 4.5 grams of saturated fat, and less than 95 milligrams of cholesterol per 3½ ounces. This compares to seven cuts just 20 years ago.

McNeill says, however, the industry’s best messages may sometimes get lost in the discussion on lean. “While the focus on lean is important, it’s only part of our great beef nutrition story,” she says. “All beef provides 10 essential nutrients, including high-quality protein, important to good health.”

Still, she says having the tremendous lean message is very important — even if it isn’t the particular message the industry decides to utilize in every instance.

“Historically, it’s been an important focus,” McNeill says, “because unfortunately, when consumers and health professionals think of nutrition and beef, they often think of fat first.

“Today we’re suggesting to our state beef-council partners they don’t need to talk as much about the numbers, because lean cuts have become so prevalent,” she says. “We need to stress that many popular cuts



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While fat is still a leading barrier for consumers choosing beef, “The lean story is giving us many chances to tell a good nutrition story,” says McNeill. “We have a great opportunity to show that beef is

surprisingly more lean and nutritious than [consumers] think.”

McNeill points to the Beef in an Optimal Lean Diet — or BOLD — study as a means of doing that. The BOLD study demonstrated that a heart-healthy diet containing 5 ounces (oz.) a day of lean beef was just as heart-healthy as the government’s “optimal” diet based on chicken as a

protein. It also showed that the heart-healthy diet including beef can lower total and LDL-cholesterol levels by 10%.

“We found that researchers were surprised not just by the results, but by the terrific nutrition profiles of the beef cuts,” McNeill says, noting that even beef cuts that don’t fit the government’s definition of lean can fit into properly balanced diets.

“The unintended consequences of

such emphasis on lean cuts of beef might have contributed to a ‘good cut/bad cut’ perception,” says McNeill. “Beef has become leaner overall, and any beef cut can be part of a healthy and balanced diet. In fact, the American Heart Association (AHA) has certified six cuts as heart healthy.

“People are really open to a balance of fat today,” she says.

Savell says it’s a matter of providing the right type of fat. “Consumers want taste fat, not waste fat,” he says. “We can’t avoid the need for a certain amount of fat for eating acceptability.”

Of most importance, according to Savell, is the industry must ensure data being used on packaging, in dietary recommendations and in other venues stays up-to-date with the product. “We need to make sure that every product carries current information,” he says. “There’s more of a problem with out-of-date information than there is with the product itself.”

Brave new approaches

It’s great the industry has developed a positive message about its lean products, but it isn’t necessarily one it will use predominantly in the future.

“The nutrition landscape is getting more complicated,” says McNeill. “Now, instead of ‘eat less fat,’ there’s more guidance to ‘eat a plant-based diet.’ So we have to start understanding how beef benefits the changing philosophies in diet and health.

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“It also raises the question: What is the future optimal diet? We need to stress the point that beef is simply better than ever — a great-tasting, nutritionally valuable food for a satisfying eating experience,” she says.

McNeill says it isn't necessary for beef to push aside other proteins to do that.

“Forty percent of many Americans' diet is junk food,” she says. “It's not about replacing other proteins.”

Staying engaged in the nutrition arena is still critical for the industry, says Clay Burtrum, who serves on the 20-member Beef Promotion Operating Committee representing the Federation of State Beef Councils. The committee determines what programs to fund with national beef

checkoff dollars and at what amounts.

“It's still very much an important issue because of today's health awareness,” he says. “Consumers are increasingly aware of their diets.”

For that reason, Burtrum says he believes the Beef Checkoff Program needs to be involved. “We have to be forward-thinking about what is going to happen next,” he says. “We know there will continue to be dietary guidelines from the

government, and we need to make sure that we publicize the most current, most accurate data. At the same time, we need to educate consumers about the nutritional benefits our products offer. Not just the lean, but the entire package.

“With a shrinking budget, we need to focus on those areas that are most important,” Burtrum says. “Nutrition is important. We're fortunate to have this kind of research and foundation to use in telling our story.”



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