

# ***New system for grading of feeder cattle proposed for improving feedlot efficiency***

By Guy Webster

Proposed standards for grading feeder cattle may replace descriptions like “black baldie,” “chickenleg” and “number-three Okie” with categories like M-1 (medium frame—very thick muscling) and L-3 (large frame—inferior muscling). But even if the U.S. Department of Agriculture adopts these standards this summer, some uses of the old terms will probably live on for years.

USDA officially proposed the new standards for feeder grades May 1. Boards of directors of both the National Cattlemen’s Association and the Farm Bureau Federation have endorsed the changes. The proposal’s public-comment period ended July 1, and Ned Tyler, chief of USDA’s Livestock Standardization Branch promises a decision by September 1.

In the age range of about eight to 16 months, most cattle change hands from a cow-calf rancher to a feedlot operator. Currently, these feeder cattle are graded in the same manner as finished cattle: prime, choice, good, standard, or utility. The standards reflect differences in development at the time the animals are graded, but do not necessarily predict the animal’s grading at the time of slaughter.

These gradings are used in market reports by USDA and others, and in feeder sales in some parts of the country, especially the Southeast, but rarely in producer-feeder transactions in the West. Instead, cattlemen have come up with a set of terms to refer to cattle appearances and breed types. A black baldie, for example, is a Hereford-Angus cross with white face and black body. Number-three Okies are mixed breeds with strong dairy characteristics.

## **Frame and Muscling**

The proposed new standards are based on two key variables: frame size and muscle thickness. Each is split into three levels. Frame categories are Small (S), Medium (M) and Large (L). Thickness categories are Very Thick Muscling (1), Slightly Thick Muscling (2) and Inferior Muscling (3). Besides the nine possible combinations of frame size and muscle thickness types, such as S-1, M-1, M-2, one other grade would be established. Cattle that are unhealthy and those that are hard to fatten because of “double-muscling,” would be grouped into one grade, “Inferior.”

University of Arizona Extension livestock specialist Albert Lane foresees several advantages to the proposed grading standards.

“The primary aim is better communication,” he said. “With these standards, someone in Arizona can call up a cattle dealer in Fort Worth, Texas he’s never dealt with before. They can talk about 100 M-1’s and both of them mean the same thing.”

The standards could also help feedlot operators group cattle into lots. Lane explained: “Now, you usually have a few large or small frame animals in with a pen that is mostly medium frame. If the pen is marketed when the medium animals are finished to choice grade, you’ll have large ones that are not fattened enough and small ones you’ve fed longer than you needed to.” A more uniform pen of animals could be fed more efficiently for the best potential value.

Most thickly muscled animals, like larger frame ones, can be kept on feed longer without laying on excess fat. However, animals that are too heavily muscled, called “double-muscling,” may not fatten enough. They would be graded Inferior. Tyler of USDA estimates that 85 percent of straight beef-breed cattle would qualify as Medium or Very Thickly Muscled (1), while Inferior Muscled (3) would apply mainly to straight dairy breeds.

This summer, UA meats scientist Dr. John Marchello is comparing growth rates of 150 feeder cattle sorted into three groups by frame size. His team will also compare carcass characteristics of animals from each group slaughtered after different lengths of time on feed.

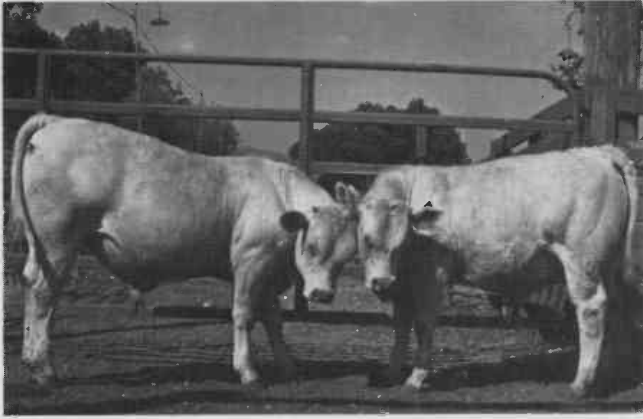
In earlier studies, Marchello found that, when all cattle are fed to the same body condition rather than the same finish weight, frame size is not a reliable predictor of carcass characteristics. “The one exception, is that smaller frame sizes tended to grade a little better, quality-wise,” he noted recently.

“Where you’ll probably gain an advantage by selecting for larger frame size is in performance—rate of weight-gain,” said Marchello. That’s what he is looking at this summer.

## **Arizona Feeders’ Views**

Some Arizona cattle feeders do not see any advantage in the proposed standards here. But they do not object to them, either.

Sam Benedict of Casa Grande, president of the Arizona Cattle Feeders’ Association, said, “I think that new set of rules would be helpful to people in the Midwest, but for us in the West, we’ve gotten used to our own set of terms and I think we’d ignore the new ones pretty much.



Frame size may be a matter of length as well as height. The medium-framed steer on the left above and the medium-framed heifer on the right below, each show greater length than the corresponding small-framed animals beside them.

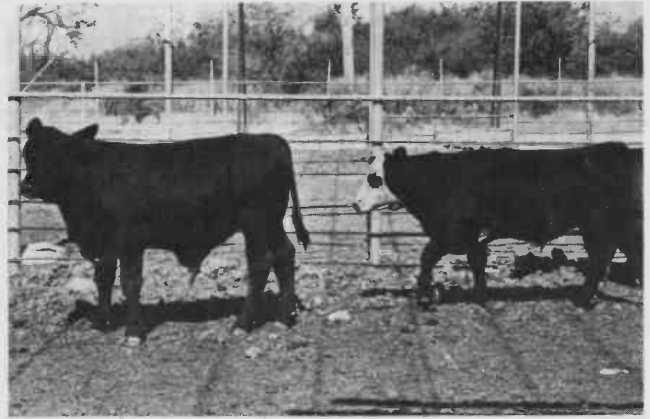


"Most of us in the Southwest are operators that trade weekly or oftener in cattle, so we probably communicate better with our buyers. A lot of them in the Midwest just trade once or twice a year... Grading is a matter of individual judgement either way, so there's got to be an understanding between the buyer and the seller."

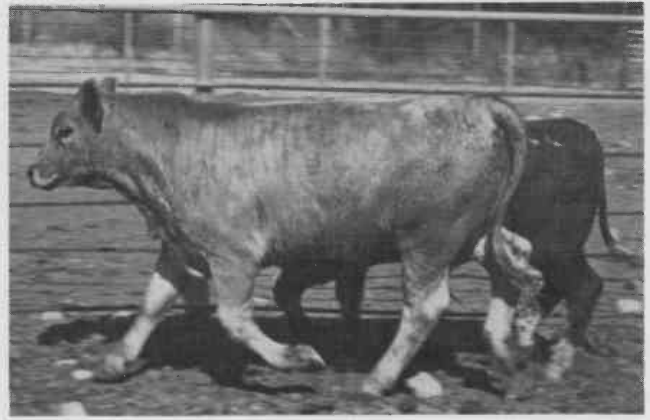
Benedict calls the proposed standards "satisfactory" since they would help some cattlemen. "They don't do much for me, but I'm not interested in somebody going to a whole lot of trouble to make something different for me."

Earl Kelly, executive vice-president of the Arizona Cattle Feeders' Association, said that a change in grading would affect Southeastern cattlemen more than Western ones. "In the Southeast, they do a lot of selling and advertising of feeders by grade. In all my experience as a feedlot operator, I've never had an order-buyer call and say, 'I want some U.S. Choice,' or 'I want some U.S. Good.'"

Kelly agreed with Benedict that Arizona feeders will continue to use terms like number-one Okie and number-two crossbred even if new standards are established. "It boils down to knowing each individual order-buyer," said Kelly.



The large-framed black steer on the left above stands taller, on longer legs, than the medium-framed steer behind him. Both have medium-thick muscling, close to being heavy-muscled. The steer running below is L-1, large-framed and heavy-muscled.



### Useful Tool

"I can't see any possible harm in the new system," he added. "I think it's a step in the right direction to have grades that mean something. I don't think they mean a cotton-picking thing currently. Possibly, in time, the new ones will become a useful tool for even our people."

President of the Arizona Cattle Growers' Association, Fred Boice of Tucson, feels some benefits of the proposed standards would not take so long to reach Arizona. "Inter-area trade is where this is going to be important," he explained recently. "Lots of cattle in Arizona are shipped into here from other areas. The number fed here is substantially greater than the number grown here. If somebody from Bogalusa calls up and says he's got 200 such and such, I'll know what he's talking about. But I'm not going to change my way of talking with people that I've been dealing with every week for 20 years."

The number of calves born in Arizona each of the past two years has been below 300,000. The number of cattle on feed in the state at the beginning of each year has been more than 400,000.

Tyler at USDA predicts that, if the new grading system

is adopted, federal and state marketing services would be the first to use it regularly. Other early uses would be in futures trading nationwide and feeder sales in the Southeast. "The standards would be voluntary, so cattlemen would adopt them only when and if they find them useful," he said.

"The Livestock Marketing Service of USDA will very likely go out into a number of areas and put on demonstrations about these classifications and how they work," said UA's Lane. "Extension Service people will put on demonstrations, too."

Grading of frame and muscling includes "eyeball calibration" and subjective judgement. The workshops will aim to improve the uniformity of how the standards are applied, Lane explained. "It's a lot easier to judge frame size than some of the other characteristics they go by now."

Lane said that the switch in grading standards would be worthwhile because of the efficiency it could add to the cattle industry.



These frozen carcasses prepared by Colorado State University were shown at Cattle Feeders' Day on the UA campus May 3. They show the link between frame size and finishing readiness. Note the thickness of backfat on the small-frame animal above compared to that of the large-frame animal below, slaughtered at the same live weight.



## Text of standards proposed by USDA

### Frame Size Grades

**Large Frame (L):** Minimum requirements for feeder cattle included in this grade have large frames, are thrifty, and are tall and long bodied for their age. They would be expected to excel in growth rate but steers and heifers would not be expected to produce U.S. Choice beef carcasses until their live weights exceed about 1,200 pounds and 1,000 pounds, respectively.

**Medium Frame (M):** Minimum requirements included in this grade have slightly large frames, are thrifty, and are slightly tall and slightly long bodied for their age. They would be expected to have an average growth rate. Steers and heifers would be expected to produce U.S. Choice beef carcasses at live weights of 1,000 to 1,200 pounds and 850 to 1,000 pounds, respectively.

**Small Frame (S):** Feeder cattle included in this grade have small frames, are thrifty, and are shorter bodied and not as tall as specified as the minimum for the Medium Frame grade. They would be expected to have a relatively slow growth rate. Steers and heifers would be expected to produce U.S. Choice grade carcasses at live weights of less than 1,000 pounds and 850 pounds, respectively.

### Thickness Grades

**No. 1:** Feeder cattle which possess minimum qualifications for this grade show a high proportion of beef breeding. They must be thrifty and slightly thick throughout. They are slightly thick and full in the forearm and gaskin showing a rounded appearance through the back and loin with moderate width between the legs, both front and rear. Cattle show this thickness with a thin covering of fat; however, cattle eligible for this grade may carry varying degrees of fat.

**No. 2:** Feeder cattle which possess minimum qualifications for this grade are usually of predominantly large dairy or non-beef breeding. They are thrifty and are narrow throughout. They appear narrow through the forequarter and the middle part of the rounds. The forearm and gaskin are thin and the back and loin have a sunken appearance. The legs are set close together, both front and rear. Cattle show this narrowness with a thin covering of fat; however, cattle eligible for this grade may carry varying degrees of fat.

**No. 3:** Feeder cattle included in this grade are thrifty animals which have less thickness than the minimum requirements specified for the No. 2 grade.