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Animal Proteins on the Plate

This column is being written the day before the celebration of our nation's independence, an obviously important day for the United States, but also a benchmark day for the summer grilling season. As a beef producer, it is easy for me to go to the freezer to grab a package of steaks or ground beef, but those doing so in the grocery store have seen the impact of tighter beef supplies, reflected in price. Let's be real, the price of everything has been on the increase! The final topic from BIF that I'd like to tackle is *"Today's beef consumer: who are they, what do they say and what do they want?"* presented by Dr. Mandy Carr, Sr. Executive Director, Scientific Affairs, NCBA.

A plethora of consumer surveys and evaluation was referenced in Dr. Carr's presentation, visit: https://beefimprovement.org to look at the full presentation and excellent graphics within. Certainly, at a beef focused conference, beef was the presentation lens, but for the most part there was good news for all the animal proteins. Since 2021 consumers saying they are likely to eat beef was up two percentage points, chicken three points and the positive for all animal proteins is that meat alternatives saw a seven-point DECRESE in preference. Animal protein substitutes only account for 0.4% of the total fresh meat market share.

Consumer demand is driven by three major factors: Consumption, Preference and Value. Factors such as eating experience directly drive preference, while others such as purchasing specialty labeled meat, such as locally grown, are driven by value. Beef continues to lead the pack when the eating experience is discussed, besting chicken by more than twenty-five percentage points when considering taste. Chicken does still rank first in protein source selection among consumers at forty three percent compared to beef's thirty six percent.

Another interesting insight was that three quarters of all meals are prepared at home and ninety-four percent of consumers report that they intend to cook more meals at home in the future. This speaks about the need to have meat cuts that are convenient and easy to prepare. In addition to cooking more at home, the way consumers purchase meat and other groceries is evolving. While most of the meat is still purchased in grocery stores, online sales are increasing. Nearly two thirds of purchasers under the age of 45 report that at least some of their shopping is now done online.

Many discussions throughout the industry revolve around the demand side of the equation and what the consumer is willing to pay for meat protein products. Data in this presentation showed that fresh meat sales have seen an 8.4% increase in dollar value sales and a 4.0% increase in poundage sales across all sources in the current year. The only negative trend is in meat alternatives, all good signs for those in the animal protein business. Beef leads the fresh meat sales, and it appears that consumers are changing behaviors to maximize protein purchases.

A quarter of consumers are familiar with how livestock are raised for food, with over two thirds claiming to consider how the animal was raised when purchasing meat, with the top priority being animal welfare. Hormones/antibiotics/vaccines, food safety and environmental impacts are also considerations for those who have concerns. Quality assurance programs seem to have a positive effect on the perception of most consumers, which speaks to the need to continue to have more producer's quality assurance certified through the programs offered by the various species.

Producers can get focused on many facets of livestock production, from feeding to reproduction to production economics, but let us never forget that consumer preferences need to be considered as well. Much of the work summarized above is a direct result of checkoff dollars at work. Let's all do our part to keep animal protein on the plate!