

MEAT CLASSIFICATION Time to enter the 21st century

South Africa's meat classification system is outdated and must be changed, says **Professor Frikkie Nesor**. Heather Dugmore spoke to him.



ABOVE: South Africa's current meat classification system has a negative impact on indigenous beef cattle production, says Prof Nesor. WAYNE SOUTHWOOD



PROF FRIKKIE NESER



DR MICHEL SCHOLTZ

Prof Frikkie Nesor does not mince his words. In his opinion, South Africa's 30-year-old meat classification has failed to keep up with scientific research. In addition, it does not reward cattlemen for specific meat qualities, such as taste and tenderness.

"It also needs to accommodate and equitably reward various production practices, including beef off the veld," says Nesor, who is at University of the Free State's Department of Animal, Wildlife and Grassland Sciences.

He is particularly concerned about the current system's impact on indigenous beef cattle production.

Currently, the system is based on two main criteria: age and the amount of fat on the carcass. This means pre-two-tooth animals are classified as A-grade and one- to two-tooth as AB. Three- to six-tooth animals are classified as B-grade, and full-mouth and higher as C-grade.

CORRECT LABELLING OF MEAT PRODUCTS IS ALSO A CONCERN

According to Nesor, much excellent, peer-reviewed research has been done on beef quality. This has included collaborative research conducted in the early 2000s by South Africa's Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and Australia's Co-operative Research Centre for Beef. Studies found that Southern Africa's indigenous Sanga breeds (Nguni, Afrikaner, Drakensberger and Tuli) had a high percentage of tenderness genes and outstanding meat tenderness qualities.

"Research by Dr Philip Strydom of the ARC also found little or no difference between the meat quality of indigenous and European/British breeds, as is sometimes claimed. Yet, the current system discriminates against indigenous breeds, which are early maturing and ideally suited to being marketed off the veld without the need for heavy supplementation," explains Nesor.

All over the world it is recognised that AB and older animals of all breeds have very tasty meat.

"But our current grading system doesn't accommodate this fact, although the tenderness and taste can be as good if not better than younger, A Grade animals," stresses Nesor.

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According to research, there is no difference between the beef quality of European/British breeds and that of indigenous breeds. WAYNE SOUTHWOOD

PRICE RANGE

He stresses that beef classified as AB should be incorporated into the A-grade price range. In this way indigenous and other breeds and crossbreeds that are marketed off the veld would become viable as an alternative to feedlot-finished animals.

"But this isn't happening and there's no price reward for keeping animals on the veld for longer."

Statistics, he says, speak for themselves: 83% of beef slaughtered in the formal sector is classified as A-grade.

BEHIND THE TIMES

Because the meat classification system has not kept up with the times and the need for sustainably produced beef, SA production has been hit hard.

"Many cattlemen have given up on purebred indigenous breeds such as the Nguni because of price discrimination, with feedlots paying R2/kg to R6/kg less for

FAST FACTS

- SA's meat classification systems is 30 years old.
- There is no incentive for farmers to produce meat with specific qualities.
- An improved classification system will add to indigenous breeds' viability.

Nguni weaners and those of other indigenous breeds," Nesor charges.

This means that indigenous cattle numbers will increasingly decline, putting these breeds at risk.

At the same time, mature cow weights of animals run under extensive conditions must be reduced.

"We need medium-framed animals for production off the veld," he stresses. "Large animals often don't do well in an extensive veld system, unless heavily supplemented."

CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change will also play a significant role.

"Adaptability will in future become an extremely important



TOP: Grass-fed cattle carcasses in the cold room at Impala Meats, a family-owned business that continually sources new supplies. JACO VISSER

ABOVE: Consumers and retailers do not always understand meat classification. CHRIS NEL

quality. Indigenous breeds are the answer to climate change because of their special ability to adapt to heat," Nesor says. "This will be particularly important in the harsher fringe areas such as northern KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, the Northern Cape and the Karoo."

The ARC's Dr Michiel Scholtz concurs.

"We need to breed the correct breed and weight of animal for climate change. A cow of 400kg to 450kg weaning a calf of between 180kg and 200kg every year has a lower carbon and water footprint than a larger animal. I emphasise 'annually' because fertility is

the key. If the current national commercial herd's calving percentage of 65% can be increased to 80% in combination with appropriate size, it would significantly reduce the footprint," he says.

MATCH THE SIZE

Two Master's degree students at the ARC are currently researching the optimal cow size for different geographical areas determined by the type of environment and available amount of grass. Their preliminary results should be available by the end of 2015. Scholtz stresses

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← that structured crossbreeding is underutilised in South Africa's commercial sector. He maintains that if smaller-framed, indigenous and composite breeds were crossed with beefier or British and European breeds, weaning efficiency could increase by up to 40%. This could contribute to the future survival of indigenous breeds, but only if cattlemen were adequately compensated in a revised classification system.

OTHER PROBLEMS

In 2009, an ARC team was appointed to investigate the meat classification system. This culminated in a symposium at the ARC in November last year, where the Red Meat Producers' Organisation (RPO) confirmed that the current system had certain shortcomings. One of these is that consumers and retailers often have difficulty understanding the system, and intensive consumer and retailer education is therefore necessary.

Correct labelling of meat products is also a concern

– consumers and retailers need to understand exactly what they are buying.

For example, retailers currently pay less for beef with the creamy-coloured or yellow fat characteristic of grass-fed, veld-reared cattle. Many retailers are not aware that it has been scientifically proven that creamier/yellower fat is more nutritious, with the correct balance of Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids. Cattle in all age groups that are grass-fed, veld-raised or naturally fed have creamier/yellower fat.

Asked why the system had not already been improved, given all this research, Nesor says that all the role players in the red meat industry would have to agree on a new system.

"This include feedlots, as it would impact on their profitability. But the [RPO] symposium reached no agreement, other than to arrange another workshop with all role players attending.

"So, maybe there is still hope."

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Improved rations

All indigenous breeds are early-maturing in terms of fat deposits, according to Prof Frikkie Nesor. "Indigenous cattle also tend to put on fat quickly in a conventional feedlot system. For this reason, they're not that popular with feedlot operators and owners. However, put them in a feedlot and feed them less

energy and more protein and roughage, and they perform wonderfully."

Nesor says this approach does not make the most of a breed such as the Nguni, which was not bred for the feedlot environment.

"It was bred as an early-maturing beef animal with outstanding meat quality, which should be marketed straight from the veld."



RIGHT: The current meat classification system is based on age and the amount of fat on the carcass. CHRIS NEL

BELOW: Indigenous breeds such as the Afrikaner are well-adapted to local environmental conditions. WAYNE SOUTHWOOD

