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WA Beef Industry and consumers benefit from Meat Standards Australia (MSA)

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The Western Australian beef industry confirmed its world-class status when it became the first to implement the national beef grading scheme Meat Standards Australia (MSA) statewide in March 2000.

John Lucey reports on the joint initiative being undertaken by Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) and Agriculture Western Australia’s Meat Program to give Western Australian consumers a money-back guarantee that MSA beef will consistently be tender, juicy and flavoursome.

'Meating' the market

For some years, Australians have been eating less and less beef. One of the reasons for this decline is dwindling consumer confidence in beef's eating quality.

Consumer surveys in 1997 identified that 38 per cent of consumers had problems with beef quality, 57 per cent were unable to select tender beef and 81 per cent said price did not relate to quality. However, the good news was that the same consumers said they would happily come back to beef if the industry could guarantee tenderness and quality and eliminate the hit-or-miss factor. The industry had to take the disappointment out of the eating experience and put the enjoyment back in.

Faced with this market feedback, MLA developed MSA, now acknowledged as the leading beef grading scheme in the world. The MSA scheme grades and labels beef according to its tenderness. When combined with the recommended cooking method, MSA guarantees eating quality with a money-back guarantee.

How MSA works

There is no mystery about how tenderness happens. It is not just a happy accident and it is not just the luck of the draw. Tender beef is the result of adhering to a set pattern of procedures and guidelines from the farm to the end-user.

There are three inter-related factors which influence tenderness.

First, there is carcase quality which is affected by the hanging and aging methods. Other influences include the breed (some breeds are naturally more tender than others), the animal's sex and the feeding program.

Second is the muscle characteristics of the particular cuts. Some muscles develop more
connective tissue because they do more work than other muscles. Long, slow, gentle cooking brings out the best in these cuts.

Third is the cooking method. The MSA tenderness guarantee includes appropriate techniques for specific cuts because they are most enjoyable when their individual characteristics are matched to particular cooking techniques.

MSA works by assessing the live animal and the carcase quality, grading it, giving it an appropriate cooking method and labelling it as either Supreme Tenderness, Premium Tenderness or Tenderness Guaranteed.

MSA goes further than any previous grading system. For the first time, industry has consulted with consumers to understand what they want and why they want it.

MSA has been developed using over 350,000 taste samples to test different cuts, different cooking methods, and different production and processing techniques. It is the largest product testing program ever undertaken for beef in the world, which is continuously being refined and updated.

The introduction of MSA to Western Australia

The successful introduction of MSA in Western Australia on 24 March was the result of a unique partnership between Agriculture Western Australia’s Meat Program and MLA. The Meat Program responded to the Western Australian beef industry’s desire to implement MSA as soon as possible to provide formal proof of the inherent high quality of the State’s beef.

With the approval of Western Australia’s Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries, Monty House, the agency provided $1.1 million over three years to help support the implementation of MSA, and to work with MLA on developing MSA export markets.

The Western Australian MSA introduction process has been acknowledged by MLA as the favoured model for future MSA introductions throughout Australia. The Western Australian MSA ‘team’ comprised Meat Program staff, who coordinated producer MSA licensing and assisted with processor MSA licensing, and MLA staff who coordinated the retailer/wholesaler/food service training. This whole-of-production chain approach has resulted in unprecedented support for MSA among all sectors of the State’s beef industry.
Currently, over 800 producers are MSA licensed to supply cattle eligible for grading. All major Western Australian processors are MSA licensed and supply the 130 outlets throughout the State – including major supermarkets, independent butchers and restaurants – which sell MSA beef.

The cooperation and commitment to MSA has been a reflection of the hard work undertaken by the Western Australian MSA Advisory Committee, which oversees the implementation of MSA. Comprising representatives from producers, processors, retailers, agents, industry, MLA and Agriculture Western Australia, this committee has worked tirelessly to ensure MSA is successful in Western Australia.

**MSA works in the West**

By April 2000 (two weeks after the official Western Australian MSA introduction), there were over 1,600 cattle being MSA-graded weekly. With MSA-grading compliance rates of over 90 per cent on average, Western Australian cattle are demonstrating the highest level of eating quality from any of the current MSA markets, including Sydney and Brisbane.

Historically, the Western Australian beef industry has been proud of the quality of its young, fast-growing product. MSA has enabled the State to formally prove the high quality of its cattle, which can only lead to long-term benefits for the State’s entire beef industry.

**Acknowledgements**

The WA MSA Project is a joint partnership between Agriculture Western Australia’s Meat Program and Meat and Livestock Australia. The Project Manager is John Lucey, who can be contacted on (08) 9771 1299, or by e-mail on jlucey@agric.wa.gov.au

Dubbed the “Conception to Consumption tour”, the ‘who’s-who’ from Western Australian radio stations and newspapers took part in a media tour in March 2000 to promote MSA and its official introduction to Western Australia. The tour highlighted the application of MSA to every member of the supply chain, including the producer, processor and retailer.

(Above) Pictured here sampling MSA product - Agriculture Western Australia’s MSA Project Manager John Lucey played a major role in the introduction of MSA into Western Australia. (Left) Enjoying the lunch held at Lamont’s restaurant, to officially introduce MSA into Western Australia, were Meat and Livestock Australia Chairman David Crombie and Agriculture Western Australia’s Meat Program Manager Renata Paliiskis-Bessell. (Right)