

Proposed USDA Maturity Change

The USDA quality grading system is intended to identify differences in palatability of cooked beef through the evaluation of marbling and physiological maturity. This maturity has been measured by skeletal ossification, or changing of cartilage to bone within the backbone and lean color. This is physiological age, which is related to true chronological age, but with a margin of error.

Since 2001, after BSE, dentition has been used to evaluate physiological age and to eliminate nervous tissue from animals Over 30 Months (OTM) and to exclude OTM carcasses from export programs. However, this maturity measurement was not part of the quality grading system.

Currently, there is a proposal to include dentition and documentation of actual age under a USDA verified program, as additional options for determining maturity. This means that if a carcass is not OTM but has advanced skeletal maturity, it would not be discounted as a Hard Bone. Unfortunately, within USPB, that would only apply to about 0.5% of all cattle. Some estimates for the entire industry are about 1% of all fed cattle.

If an animal is OTM, it will continue to be discounted because discounts for OTM refer to export programs, which would not be affected by this grading change.

Age is still related to quality. However, research has shown that carcasses UNDER 30 months as measured by dentition, that differed in bone maturity, had no significant differences in palatability and tenderness. Therefore, this is the driving force behind the proposed change. For information, call 866-877-2525 or visit www.uspremiumbeef.com. ♦