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TODAY'S FAMILIES AND BEEF CONSUMPTION

Today's families are blessed with more time and labor-saving devices than earlier generations. But in the midst of time and labor savers, the rush of family members seems to intensify each year. The structure of today's families also differs considerably from the "traditional" family. There are an increasing number of working women and an explosion of single-parent families headed by women. Most women work even in two-income families. Food away from home is no longer a luxury but a fundamental component of today's convenience-driven lifestyle. Consumers seek to eliminate chores at home and to save time. They are willing to pay higher prices for short cuts.

How does this affect beef producers? The product that the family buys will have to be a product that gives time back to the family. The day of long slow preparation is basically gone. Beef products must be the "ready to go." Families will buy meals that are quick to prepare, nutritious, and of good quality, value and taste. Consumers lack cooking skills, the interest in elaborate dishes, and lack the interest in planning meals in advance. Most choices are made at the point of purchase. Few families sit down to eat, they don't separate eating from other activities and they eat snacks or a meal at the same time they are working or in the car on the go. The beef producer is challenged to produce a product that is tasty, consistent in quality, safe, nutritious and is marketed in easy to prepare or eat form. Efficient beef production linked with high quality products will meet the needs of both the consumer and producer.

Issues of interest to today's beef consumers include:

Food safety

Time saving preparation techniques

Leaner cuts - Low fat and cholesterol

Low fat processed meats and snacks

Eating out - beef most popular items in restaurants

One handed foods

Consumer- Ready products:

- Labeled with cooking instructions, trimmed, portion controlled
individually wrapped, quick to cook

- Hassle-free microwaveable, oven ready and grill ready

- Prepared foods ready to be taken home: Dinner in a bag at fast food prices

Ethnic specialities Soul, Cajun, French, Japanese, Caribbean, Mexican, Chinese, Italian

Gourmet foods

Ready to eat products

Prepared meal centers in supermarkets & in store cafes

Convenience markets

- TOTE - Take out to eat
- Oven -ready products
- Pre-prepared products - Meals in minutes

New marketing techniques: cooking classes, visiting chef programs, self service cases

Misconceptions by special interest groups

In 1995, a group of Extension Agents and lay leaders met to develop a tool to aid today's families. This tool was to be known as the FIT (Families in Transition) Task Force. This committee has as its main goal, to develop an interpretive liaison aimed at local, county and state decision makers to market the Extension Family and Consumer Sciences program. The FCS Program and FIT Task Force can work hand in hand with the beef producers, industry, and families to promote the health and nutritional needs of today's families. Beef promotion and consumption certainly figures prominently in this equation.