70:70 Marbling and Muscle
Dr. Jerry Lipsey, Executive Vice President
American Simmental Association

All the fence building, hay baling, calf weaning and hundreds of other production tasks would be for nothing if the beef consumers of this nation disregarded our products. Beef Industry Leaders have focused on beef product demand and the results have been encouraging. Near record cattle and beef prices are partly the result of attentive action toward beef eating quality and consumer satisfaction, and we salute NCBA as the driving force enhancing beef demand.

Consumers choose beef because we like the taste. Even though the science and physiology of taste are complicated, every beef lover understands the attributes of tenderness, juiciness and flavor.

Both genetics and management play large roles affecting beef taste. Harvesting healthy, young, fast growing, well-marbled cattle that require either no implants or perhaps, mild growth stimulants are key to consistent and predictable great tasting beef.

From a genetic management and strategy standpoint, selection for both growth and marbling have become important. The cattle feeding industry certainly values fast-growing cattle with potential to grade Choice, and most breed associations boast rapid improvements in both Yearling Weight and Marbling EPDs. So, U.S. Beef producers are on our way to long-term success, right?

Not so fast! All of this discussion has been focused on output value. Is anyone willing to address production costs? Fuel, feed, fertilizer and labor costs are at combined all-time record high levels. Without doubt, we must produce beef that maintains and grows consumer demand, but every tool to control and combat costs is now important to the future of our industry.

Producing highly marbled beef is only part of the puzzle of beef industry prosperity. We absolutely must produce tasty, tender, juicy, high-value beef using proven technologies that can economically sustain our businesses. In this industry, the most effective and verified genetic technology available that can both increase output value and decrease cost of production is wise crossbreeding. The huge impact of heterosis on the calf crop and postweaning performance will almost always greatly decrease cost per unit of production. Moreover, prudent selection of genetics making up the crossbreds, will balance production values, such as maximizing percentage Choice, YG 2s. We have positioned Simmental to ideally blend with British genetics (called biological complementarity) and produce fast growing, USDA Choice, Yield Grade 2 fed cattle.

Industry and academic leaders have often suggested targets of 70% Choice or higher, 70% YG 1s and 2s, and 0% outs (USDA Standard, YG 4s and 5s, light weights, heavy weights, etc.). Is their target achievable?
For more than a decade, the American Simmental Association has tested sires for ability to deliver both marbling and muscle, and our progress is becoming recognized across the industry. Simmental breeders have paid attention to identifying genetic lines that deliver both meat quality and carcass meat yield. In the recent decade, Simmental have improved both Marbling and Yield Grade EPDs; not many breeds can make that claim (you are welcome to review our genetic trends on www.simmental.org). Simmental X Angus and Simmental X Red Angus cattle can and do deliver a higher percentage of Choice, YG 2 carcasses than any other popular crossbreds or straightbreds. Considering that most herds retain heifer replacements, what combination of breeds can deliver more net value to America’s cowherds than Simmental X British crossbred steers and replacement heifers?

Perhaps everyone in the cattle feeding industry understands the cost reduction of feeding Continental X British crossbreds, and beef packers profit from the meat yield advantages of muscular cattle. However, our industry has been waiting for price signals that encourage both high quality and outstanding cutability cattle.

To kick-start this process, the American Simmental Association and JBS Swift & Company have agreed to a marketing grid with historic rewards for Choice, YG 2 carcasses.

This marketing grid, called **70:70**, provides outstanding rewards for fed cattle that can deliver both high marbling and muscular carcasses. This is a high payoff opportunity for well-documented genetics and management. Properly managed fed steers and heifers that result from carefully selected genetic sources will receive excellent premium price rewards from Swift. This represents a tremendous opportunity for feedyard managers who confidently know the source and history of cattle selling under the ASA-Swift grid marketing arrangement.

Understand, 70:70 isn’t for “either/or cattle” (either fat, highly marbled; or lean, lowly marbled), where the seller “rolls the dice”. This grid has true rewards for groups well above average for both quality and yield grade. There are hundreds of feedyards across the Midwest with pens of Continental X British cattle that can benefit when marketed on 70:70. The opportunity to simultaneously get premiums and reduce production costs may well be the most important next step for our beef industry to sustain and grow success. We don’t think there are many silver bullets in cattle and beef production, but reducing production costs while receiving premiums for high quality, high meat-yield carcasses may be the best invention yet.