



## QUEENSLAND Country Life

# Time to entrench MSA's grading model

The current furore in NSW over radical reforms being proposed through State Parliament over beef product description and labelling could turn out to deliver some positive outcomes for industry, but far removed from what is contained in Richard Torbay's proposed Bill.

One point that has not yet been widely understood about his plan is that it would not only affect retail butchers, but also anybody selling beef in NSW – including food service operators like cafes, restaurants and hotels. As the word 'Prime' is an AusMeat category descriptor, it could no longer be used to describe a piece of beef on a menu from a 'Steer' category animal, for example.

However, its unsettling times like this when the forum is open for industry to debate more widely topics like grading and labelling - allowing positive, commercially-relevant ideas to take shape.

For example, the industry may be drawing closer to a position where it could consider mandatory application of Meat Standards Australia principles across all appropriate cattle bound for slaughter.

Eighteen months ago, such a

preposterous notion would have been howled down, led by the two biggest processors in the country, which at that time showed no commercial interest in the program.

But times change. Suddenly, Swift, Teys and other big hitters are inside the tent. Graded numbers this calendar year look like passing one million head for the first time, and continue to grow at 15 percent annually. At some point soon, MSA appears likely to become the 'price of entry to the game'.

What better time to consider entrenching the system more deeply in the fabric of the industry?

While the advocates of the Torbay scheme talk of the lack of product descriptors between existing MSA grades and the budget beef end, they fail to recognise that MSA is perfectly capable of describing all beef descriptions from end to end – it is simply not being applied in that form currently.

Mandating MSA would solve many of the issues raised by Richard Torbay in his legislation, including eating quality problems present in the market and language issues such as those associated with dentition/ossification.

The big opposition, of course, would come from those processors who do not want to adopt the program for cost reasons, or whose markets do not require an MSA standard product. There are associated costs involved in MSA grading, but at the end of the day, an additional \$1-\$2 per carcass grading charge would be a small price to pay for guaranteeing the eating quality to the consumer using a sound, science-based system.

MSA is also perfectly capable of developing five or more grades, along similar lines as the Torbay model. In effect MSA already represents four grades – 5, 4 and 3-star, and ungraded. Ungraded is simply a line on the score continuum at 46 points, but there would be nothing stopping the industry placing another lower score line in the system for a budget product, and below that becoming grinding meat only.

After all else, even if the industry manages to convince Torbay that his current proposal is wrong, he is going to want to save face out of the very public process. Backing full implementation of MSA might just be the 'out' he is looking for.