

Industry poised to boost consumption

Appetizers, 'beef crumbles' and other easy-to-prepare items coming soon

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The boneless, skinless chicken breast can probably be found in just about every American freezer.

But the U.S. beef industry is ready to go nose to beak with that inescapable mainstay of the American diet.

Coming to a supermarket near you the boneless, beef filet!!!

"We want our own boneless, skinless chicken breast," said Carl Blackwell, executive director of the new product development and culinary center for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). The organization last week brought 1,100 cattle producers to Denver for its mid-year meeting.

"The filet has everything the chicken breast has and it has the flavor of steak," Blackwell said. "You can slice it for a salad, or bite through it for a sandwich."

The filet has the hallmarks the industry is pitching — that beef is easy to prepare and convenient for today's time-pressed consumers.

The filet is just one of the products the beef industry has researched in its efforts to boost beef consumption in the United States. That research is then turned over to companies in the processing end of the industry to use in creating and selling products in grocery stores.

Blackwell estimates the industry has spent about \$6 million on its research efforts in the last few years.

"We can wait for the manufacturers to do it, and wait 10 years, or we can do it," Blackwell said.

End of 20-year slide?

The research is also a way for the industry to turn around the sinking levels of beef consumption in the U.S. Consumption has declined for 20 years, but may be moving upward. Per-capita beef consumption for the first half of 2000 increased 2 percent to 35.1 pounds compared to a year ago, according to NCBA.

Consumers spent nearly \$26.2 billion on beef during the first half of 2000 — a new record and up nearly 8 percent from the first six months of 1999.

Blackwell traces the sudden interest in new beef products to an NCBA contest begun two years ago with cash prizes for the most innovative products. This year, the winners won prizes totaling \$250,000.

The top winner, made by RMH Foods Inc., was a steak cooked in bourbon sauce that can be heated and ready to eat in eight minutes. Other winners were a fully cooked hamburger patty, frozen hamburger patties ready to eat in 10 minutes and a slow-cooked beef stew that can be heated in the microwave in just eight minutes.

But the industry isn't resting on its laurels.

"Beef appetizers are a growing concept," Blackwell said. "There's no beef appetizers on the market."

To remedy this, the industry has creat-

ed "cheeseburger fries," a fried, breaded snack that tastes like a cheeseburger and looks like a fry.

Also on the table are "beef crumbles," packages of fully cooked ground beef for tacos, spaghetti, casseroles or other meals that call for ground beef. The crumbles packages are now being tested in West Coast supermarkets, Blackwell said.

Fresh ground beef currently accounts for 20 percent of all meat and 49 percent of all beef sold through the retail fresh-meat case, according to an NCBA study. That amounts to about \$300 million in annual sales, Blackwell said.

"All consumers have to do is open the bag and dump it in the microwave," Blackwell said. "We're just trying to make it easier for consumers."

The "steak tortilla" is currently undergoing tests as well, he said. This product answers the need to get beef, shaped into a thin circle, in every bite of a tortilla- or pita-wrapped sandwich, Blackwell said.

"We're on the edge of doing some great

things," said Lee Hall, a Kentucky producer and chairman of NCBA's new products committee. "Rome wasn't built in a day, but we still have a product that scores the best-tasting of any of the proteins among consumers."



The beef industry is preparing to tempt our taste buds with new quick and easy-to-cook products.