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Carcase classification

Market specifications for carcasses are defined primarily in terms of carcase weight, conformation and fat. For cattle and sheep the process is based on visual assessment whereas for pigs it is based on lean meat percentage dependent on the backfat thickness.

Carcase weights – carcasses are described as 'hot' if weighed generally within one hour after slaughter. The 'cold' weight will be ascertained by using a rebate. If weighed 'cold', carcasses shall be weighed within 24 hours of slaughter.

Cattle and sheep

Conformation is a visual assessment of the overall shape of the carcase and how well it is fleshed throughout. It is split into five main classes: E, U, R, O and P. Conformation class E describes carcasses of outstanding shape, but these only represent a small proportion of the national kill. Class P describes poorly muscled carcasses of inferior shape and again only a small proportion of the national kill falls into this class.

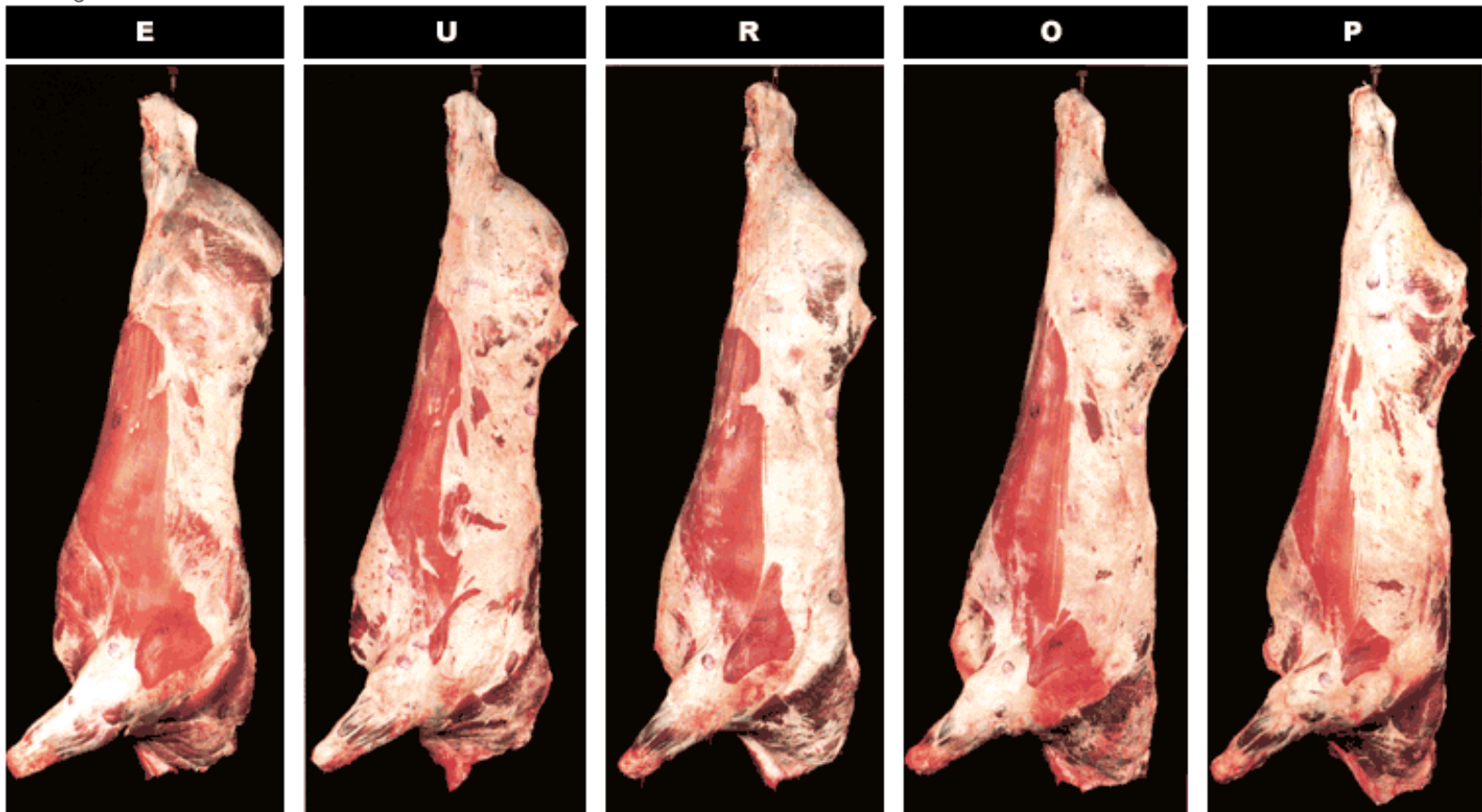
The fat class is determined by a visual appraisal of external fat development. There are five main classes ranging from 1 (very lean) to 5 (very fat).

For both the conformation and the fat class there is some subdivision of some categories.

When a carcase is described in classification terms, the conformation class is always given first.

Cattle classification - [Click here to download further information on beef carcase classification.](#)

Visual guidelines of conformation and fat class for cattle

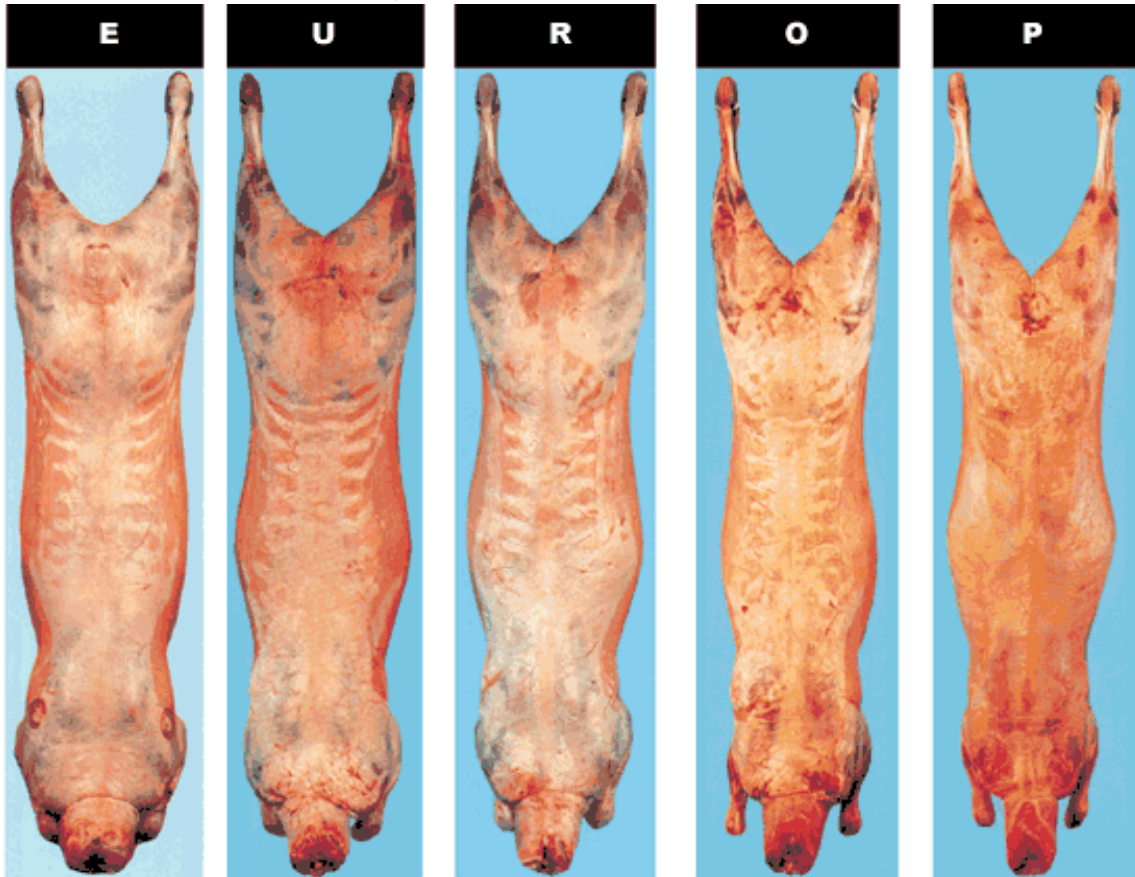


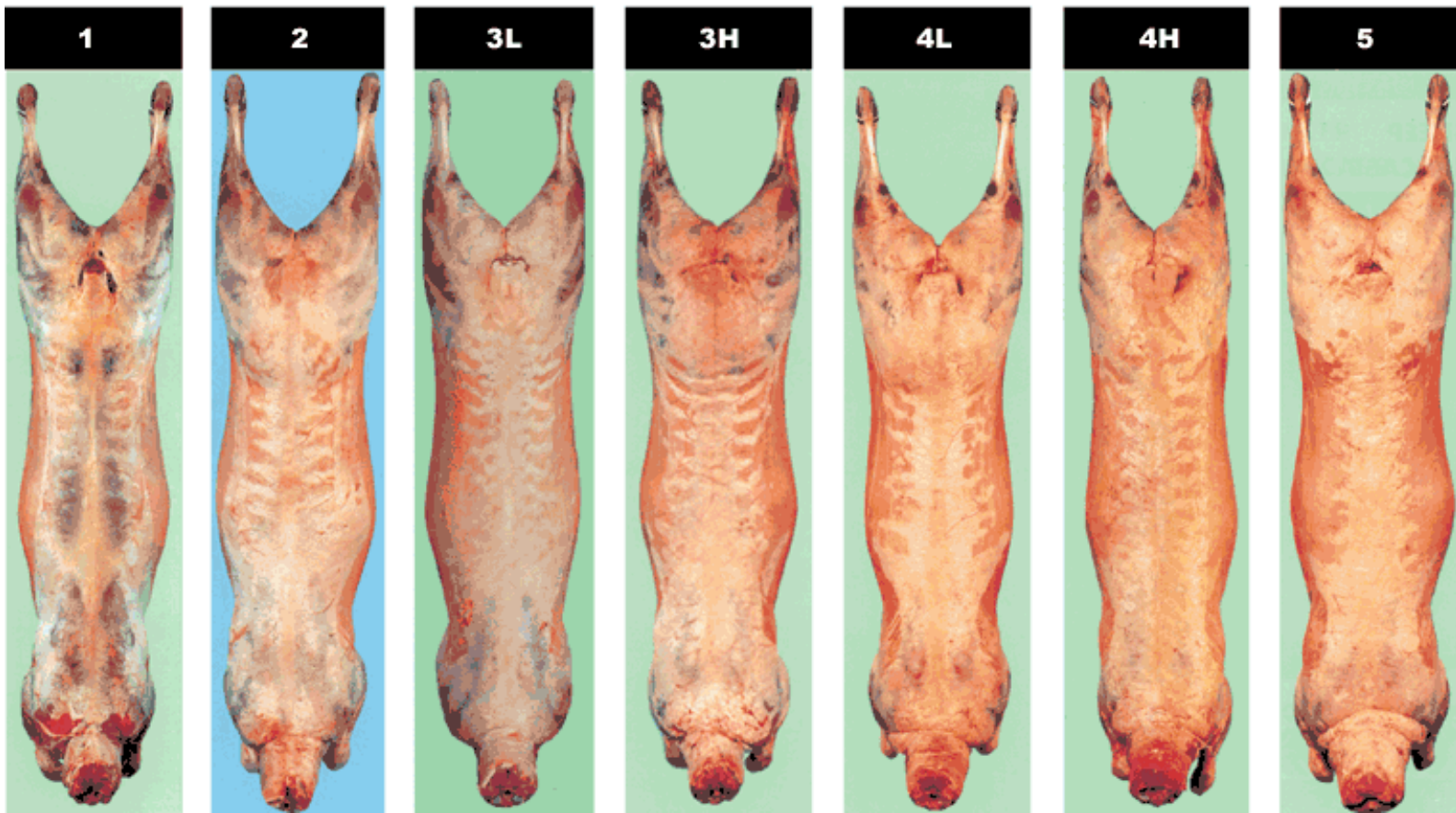


Source: EU Commission -- Brussels

Sheep classification

Visual guidelines of conformation and fat class for sheep



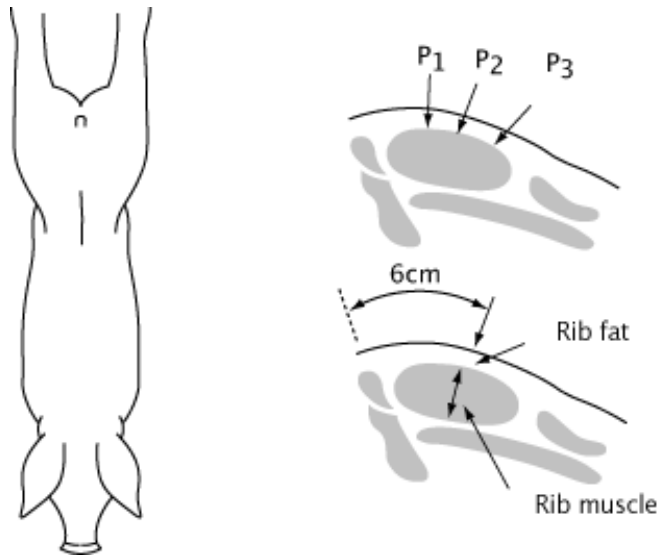


Source: MLC Authentication Services

Pig classification

Pig carcasses are classified on lean meat percentage. The lean meat percentage is estimated using the cold carcass weight and depth of backfat.

Location of probing sites on a pig carcass



Source: MLC Authentication Services

An EU grade can be allocated to a carcass by using the lean meat percentage figure, shown in the table below:

Lean meat percentage	EC Grade
60% and above	S
55 – 59%	E
50 – 54%	U
45 – 49%	R
40 – 44%	O
39% or less	P

Carcase classification for cattle, sheep and pigs also records:

- Animal identification e.g. slap mark for pigs, ear tags for sheep and cattle
- Category (**sex**)
- **Dressing** specification – the removal of parts of the carcase or trimming that occurs before weighing takes place. For cattle there are four different dressing specifications that can be used, for pigs and sheep there are just two alternatives

Classification is mandatory under EU rules at the larger abattoirs for cattle. In these plants graders are regularly monitored and regulated by staff from the Rural Payments Agency.

For more information:

Services, publications and websites

[MLC's Carcase Classification Leaflets](#)

[MLC's Carcase Classification Service](#)

[Eblex Sheep Better Returns Programme](#)

[Eblex Beef Better Returns Programme](#)

[HCC – Meat Promotions Wales](#)

[BPEX Pig Carcass Information](#)