

Commitment to quality

by Steve Suther, director of industry information

No question about it, quality assurance is “job one” for the beef industry. Everybody nods in agreement. But how many programs actually commit to such a level of quality assurance that beef producers can truly improve both quality and profitability?

You can “get” quality assurance training in many different ways. After all, this is the end of a decade that will be remembered as one in which the beef industry became serious about a consumer focus. After the National Beef Quality Audits (NBQAs) of 1991 and 1995, state after state livestock association developed and implemented beef quality assurance (BQA or QA) programs.

Many of these were and continue to be landmark, positive programs for the beef industry, but they could take quality assurance only so far.

As the years wore on, the letters *BQA* came to signify all those “best management practices” that everybody knew they should be following to ensure a wholesome beef product. Did we make progress? A little. The industry is planning another audit, half fearful of what it will find because there has been little direct connection between price received and quality delivered.



The CAB Program quality assurance training for feedlot licensees goes far beyond lip service, says John Stika, assistant director for feeder-packer relations. The Program sponsored its first training session in February.

■ Redefining quality assurance

The Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program's unique quality assurance program for its licensed feedlots has redefined the term, says John Stika, assistant director for feeder-packer relations. The first training session for new feedlot licensees was in North Platte, Neb., in February. Another was planned for later in the spring.

“We call our program ‘Commitment to Quality,’ and it really goes far beyond lip service,” says Stika. “We still focus on the quality of the process — cattle handling, implant techniques, animal health product handling and usage — but we place an equal emphasis on the quality of the end product. That’s part of what makes it unique.”

The CAB Program quality assurance training for licensed feedlot managers uses feedback from its own database. That data is correlated with the leading genetic database in the world, that of the American Angus Association — along with 20 years of *Certified Angus Beef*™ product data — to adjust live-animal management to assure a positive beef-eating experience.

The program uses the data it generates to improve quality and *Certified Angus Beef* carcass acceptance rates. “You could say we place equal emphasis on profitability and palatability,” Stika says.

In welcoming the group of feedlot managers who attended the first quality assurance training session, Jim Riemann, CAB Program associate executive director, explained the Program's history of licensing the retail, food-service and packing segments of the beef industry. “Now we want to load the pipeline with the right kind of cattle at the front end — through the Feedlot-Licensing Program.

“We will identify the genetics that work through our sire-testing program, work to get as many of those cattle as possible into the licensed feedlots, and then increase the acceptance rates on those genetics,” Riemann said.

On the process side, the CAB Program has entered into a partnership with Fort Dodge Animal Health, which developed a “Quality Assurance Critical Control Points” approach to BQA that is unsurpassed in the beef industry, Stika says. That includes a demonstration with a “realizer” animal, or one with chronic health problems that has been handled in a way that would violate most BQA tenets, in order to show the effect of mismanagement on beef quality.

At the second CAB Program training session, in Lincoln, Neb., the first week of this month, University of Nebraska animal scientists plan to present a literature review on the effects of various management strategies on carcass quality. That would include implanting and nutritional aspects.

■ Start of something big

Stika notes that the Feedlot-Licensing Program will add to available information and provide an effective feedback tool to improve the focus on quality.

“We will develop a database of known variations in management and nutrition at our licensed feedlots and correlate that with known factors prior to the cattle entering the feedlot,” he explains. “That will become an extremely valuable source of information on the effects of different strategies and their impact on carcass quality.”

The usefulness of this tool can only grow over time, Stika notes. “It’s a factor of time and volume of cattle. The more we put through this program, the greater amount of information we can put into it, and the more it can offer us in terms of quality assurance.”

The Program is not “tunnel focused” on quality grades, Stika says. “You can manage for both production efficiency and carcass merit.”

The Feedlot-Licensing Program is breaking new ground in bringing two decades of work with the product segments to bear on the production (live animal) side, Stika says. “The CAB Program had been criticized as one that simply creamed the coolers for product, but now producers will see what it can do using data to design cattle and a system that fits a specific market. This will also dispel any myths out there that the CAB Program only cares about marbling.”

■ Showing the value

Some BQA programs may backslide to the point of “lip service” because there is too little connection to value, Stika says. “You attach dollars to what a feedyard makes on BQA — such as a higher *Certified Angus Beef* acceptance rate — and it all becomes very real. The cattle feeders feel the effects.

“When we put on paper the dollar value of strategies that focus on quality, and when the cattle go to the plant for value-based sales, it’s real. The feeder immediately sees the result of a focus on going for the various aspects of quality or choosing to ignore it,” Stika says.

That’s much different than the traditional mode of studying a National Beef Quality Audit of several years ago and wondering what to change before the next one comes out in several more years.

The CAB Program’s BQA design is fully integrated with genetic information, Stika adds. Through information flow, the Program will help identify the high-quality cattle with a higher propensity to marble, as well as those that need extra management steps at the feedlot level to optimize quality grade without sacrificing profit.

“We aim to mesh management in the feedlot with both prior management and genetics,” he concludes.



Fort Dodge veterinarian T.M. “Mac” Devin demonstrates the need for viewing handling facilities at a cow’s-eye level.



Veterinarian Jerry Woodruff leads the discussion and demonstration on a “realizer” steer at the University of Nebraska-North Platte facility.



Fort Dodge meat scientist Doug Gray explains the economic consequences of intramuscular injections. By aiming for a specific triangle of relatively less-valuable neck muscle, producers only affect a pound of grinding meat, which is less costly to discard.