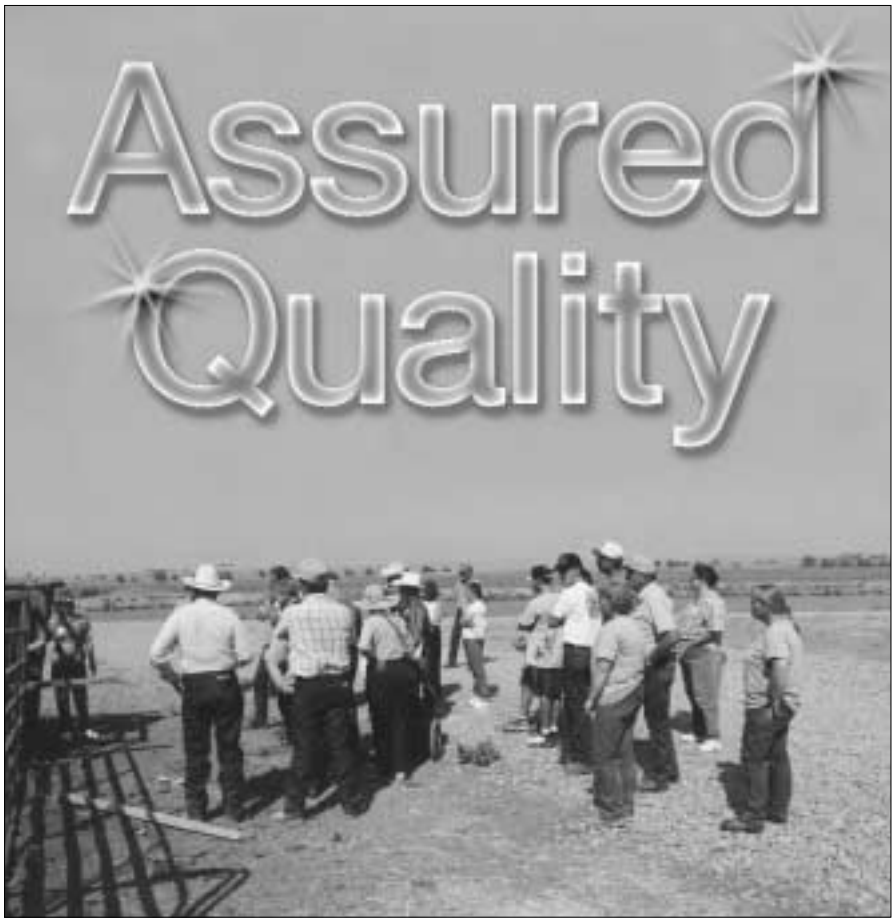


GARY VESERAT PHOTOS

*California's Quality Assurance Program can trace its roots back to 1986 when the National Beef Quality Assurance (NBQA) Program began. The program was an industry push to encourage cattlemen to follow certain quality-control measures that would exceed those of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).*

BY ANDRA CAMPBELL

The California Cattlemen's Association (CCA) Allied Industries Committee began sponsoring animal health meetings in many parts of the state when the National Beef Quality Assurance (NBQA) Program began in the late 1980s. CCA's Feeder Council initiated a Quality Certification Program (QCP) in 1990 with funding from the California Beef Council. By 1993 more than 95% of the feedlot cattle in California were covered by USDA or CCA quality-certification programs.

CCA then developed programs for cow-calf producers, forming the Cow-Calf Quality Assurance Committee in 1992 and initiating formal planning and training programs in 1993. The program is a cooperative effort among CCA, the California Beef Council, the California Veterinary Medical Association and the University of California Cooperative Extension Service.

Because half the cattle in California are produced in herds of less than 50 head, it has been important to reach a lot of the smaller-scale producers. "We've reached most of the larger producers," says Michelle Macfarlane, director of public affairs for CCA, "but we are still working hard to reach the smaller producers."

She says the Quality Assurance Program (QAP) offers an opportunity for all producers to learn tools of production and to obtain sources of information for future use. "The cost of the program is $10 per ranch," says Macfarlane. "It covers the handbook we provide for the session."

**Above: The proper placement for injections is demonstrated at a California Quality Assurance Program session geared toward cow-calf producers.**

## Lessons to learn

California's program is a four-hour course that includes lectures, videotapes, quizzes and guest lectures. The purpose is to provide an overview of knowledge so ranchers can produce the highest quality of beef possible.

Upon completion of the program, producers receive a certificate — though the hope is that they will take home much more than a piece of paper. It is hoped the program will provide tools to avoid practices that can damage the carcass and tools to improve the health and well-being of the animal.

The course covers five topic areas:

- **Drug label awareness.** Pharmaceutical products are similar to pesticides; they have all the information about the product (such as concentration, dose, withdrawal times for slaughter) on the label.
- **Proper injections.** Use the right needle for the job (for example, a 16-gauge needle for subcutaneous injections), and always use the triangular area in the neck.
- **Sanitation.** Use the "clean" areas on the animal. Also use the proper cleaning solutions to clean and disinfect your syringes and needles. Use soapy water to clean syringes to be used with modified-live vaccines (MLV), and use a mild disinfectant on syringes and needles to be used with bacterins.
- **Transportation, animal handling and facility design.** Haul animals when it is cool, not when it is extremely hot nor in sub-zero weather. Handle livestock to avoid exciting them and causing bruises. Using well-designed facilities will ease cattle processing and reduce labor.
- **Recordkeeping.** Keep a record of what products were given to individuals or groups of animals. This will ensure a producer will not send an animal to market that may have had a product that may cause a residue at the abattoir (processing plant).

## Levels of training

CCA's program is unique because of the various training sessions they offer. They

begin with the basic program, which was developed by the Cow-Calf Quality Assurance Committee in 1992, called Level 1.

**LEVEL 1: Basic Cow-Calf Quality Assurance.** More than 4,200 producers have attended this basic course. This is a total quality management (TQM) program that is the backbone of California's Beef QAP.

According to the QAP committee, this session focuses on animal handling, proper injection sites and understanding animal-pharmaceutical labeling. It also discusses how genetics affect the final product. The program stresses the importance of proper production practices and keeping accurate records.

**LEVEL 2: Advanced Animal Health.** Formed later by the QAP committee because they saw a need for a more advanced course, this program teaches producers how specific animal health products, including antibiotics and vaccines, work against diseases. The course explains how diseases work, focusing on diseases of interest in the area in which the program is given.

Close to 500 producers already have attended Level 2 sessions.

**LEVEL 3: Advanced Genetics.** This in-depth session looks at how genetics affect the final product. It includes an introduction to the USDA's beef-grading system and how producers can breed for carcass traits, such as marbling and palatability.

The program focuses on breed differences, how to match cattle types to the environment, choosing traits for which to select, and how to use breeding systems. It also teaches producers about the different avenues available through which to market their cattle.

**LEVEL 4: Advance reproduction and residue avoidance.** By fall 2000 California will have one more level of complexity to add to their QAP. Funding has been received from the California Beef Council for an additional session on advanced reproduction and residue avoidance.

## Preconditioning pays

In addition, CCA has formed the Value-Added Program (VAP) as a marketing tool for those producers who have been through the QAP training sessions. If they follow specific preconditioning guidelines on their calves, they can market their cattle as a higher-quality product, according to the QAP committee.

There are two levels within the VAP program: VAP-level producers and VAP-Plus producers.

**Attendees of a northern California Quality Assurance Program for cow-calf producers visit an abattoir to see the ill effects of injection-site lesions.**

VAP-level producers have completed the basic program. Their cattle must receive clostridial and respiratory vaccinations and boosters and also must be castrated, dehorned and healed prior to shipping.

VAP-Plus producers meet all the basic requirements, plus their calves must be weaned for at least 21 days prior to shipping. Certification is by the rancher with the use of a VAP form available through the CCA office. Purple ear tags with the VAP logo are also available to producers who wish to participate.

In a recent survey of 60 buyers of California calves, which was administered by the QAP committee, 92% indicated they would pay more for a calf that was preconditioned to a certain level and that they would pay an average of $3.18/hundredweight (cwt.) more.

## Making time for quality

Gary Veserat, vice chairman for the Quality Assurance Committee and owner of Livestock Management and Production Services, says the program needs to be marketed just as much as any other product might be. "I personally believe we need to market our beef cow-calf quality assurance programs to the producers and to continue to offer the program to the local cattlemen's associations.

"Producers are busy, and scheduling is difficult," explains Veserat, who has conducted five QAP sessions with attendance from 40 to more than 100. "But people need to make the time because the beef industry has to assure the consumer that the beef they are buying is safe and wholesome and grown with consideration for the live animal. Meat has to be free of illegal antibiotic and hormone residues, and the cattle must be handled and transported with a concern for the animal's welfare."

Veserat says it is just as important for a registered breeder to go through the program as for a commercial producer or feedlot personnel. "Ensuring the proper injection techniques and handling is important to all producers. During the National Cattlemen's Beef Association 1992 and 1995 audits of slaughter animals, [in] both fed cattle and non-fed cull cows and bulls, injection-site lesions were actually documented to have occurred when the animals were calves on the ranch."

## Source of pride

Why is it important for producers to go through programs such as QAP? John Maas, Extension veterinarian from the University of California, Davis, says that one of the main reasons is to learn to do things right.

"We have to encourage people to do the right things, to get rid of our low-quality problem in the beef industry and help increase the demand for beef products," he says.

"For the long-term health of our industry it is all-important that people go through the program," says Maas. "It's our job to help producers change their program; we can only hope that they will be proud to do so."

He believes that the time will come when producers who are not doing QAP will be discounted or will find fewer markets for their cattle.

Jim Oltjen, University of California Extension management systems specialist,

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agrees that, for the long-term health of the beef industry, it is all-important for producers to practice a quality-control program. "We can tell producers how to practice QAP and hope they will be proud to do it," he says.

He also says that without the support of the California Beef Council and the Allied Industry Committee, programs such as California's QAP would not exist. "We have a bona fide, useful program here in California. Without the support of these people, our program would be a real second-class operation."

### Taking responsibility

Abbie Nelson and her husband, Mark, own Five Star Land and Livestock near Wilton, Calif. Nelson currently serves as chairman of CCA's Quality Assurance Committee and says she can see great strides being made with seedstock producers and the commercial cow-calf producers in California.

"All that have the foresight to attend these programs are ahead of the issues, especially regarding food safety," she says. "We are also experiencing increased reproduction and increased weaning weights. In addition, we are improving hide quality, decreasing injection sites and lowering stress when handling the cattle."

Nelson continues, "Taking care of our cattle and our customers is what we do best. We consider ourselves responsible for passing along high-quality genetics and any other information on our cattle that we can to our customers. We are a resource for our cow-calf customers, so we do everything we can to ensure our cattle are in as good of health as possible and that we can document this fact."

Nelson's commitment to quality began years ago when she started working with her veterinarian to change her vaccination practices. "We moved injection locations from the rump to the neck, developed a preventive herd-health-management program, and improved our livestock-handling practices to alleviate problems with hide damage and bruises," says Nelson.

"We've always been careful about the way we handle our cattle," says Nelson, a fourth-generation rancher. She recognizes that improper handling can result in economic losses, but quickly adds, "we also take care of our cattle because it's the right thing to do."

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