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Putting the 'Q' in Quality

Managers at CAB-licensed feedlots learn and use practices to ensure quality-in, quality-out production.

BY RHONDA NIDA

Quality of life for feedlot cattle affects quality of beef after harvest. Most Angus producers raise cattle with the goals of making a profit and keeping customers happy, but it

takes attention to detail to optimize quality from every angle — for producers, cattle and consumers.

The feedlot must focus on details. Feedlot partners

licensed by Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) take extra steps to help Angus genetics realize their potential and to ensure a consistent, flavorful product for consumers. CAB quality

assurance (QA) officers at 70 licensed feedlots across the United States put the “Q” in quality, and they fill in the rest of the alphabet with professional and efficient management.

Turk Stovall, assistant director of CAB feeder-packer relations, says the Feedlot Licensing Program (FLP) builds on the CAB tradition of delivering consistent quality to consumers. The goal is to blend proven management techniques and industry strategies with the latest science to maximize production efficiency and carcass merit, he says.

“As the program becomes more involved in the production side, it seems logical to develop and encourage quality-assurance guidelines that affect eating quality and the animal’s ability to reach a high-quality end point,” Stovall says.

A strong beginning

When CAB began licensing feedlots in early 1999, the first order of business was to set the standards for the high level of quality associated with the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand. Thus, the FLP QA program was born, presented in semiannual seminars.

Since most feedlot managers attend other similar training in local producer organizations, the “Commitment to Quality” seminars serve to complement other programs, says John Stika, director of CAB feeder-packer relations.

“The thing that sets us apart from other beef quality assurance (BQA) programs is our focus on providing an optimum opportunity for the cattle to have satisfactory results. This means hitting the CAB target,” he says.

One of the program goals is to provide as much information as possible to feedlot managers and employees. Stika says CAB QA seminars touch on various management topics with presentations by leading beef industry experts.

Above: David Trowbridge, operations manager at Gregory Feedlots near Tabor, Iowa, has implemented many of the training ideas presented in CAB’s quality assurance seminars.

For example, Temple Grandin, designer of livestock handling facilities and assistant professor of animal science at Colorado State University, is a regular QA seminar featured speaker. She educates participants on safe handling practices, livestock behavior and design of livestock-handling facilities. She also presents at on-site CAB seminars with cow-calf producers and individual feedlots.

CAB in-house experts provide information on food safety, management strategies, implant techniques, genetics and nutrition, Stika says. These training seminars are conducted in central areas where new licensees are located, such as North Platte, Neb., and Kansas City, Mo.

True commitment

David Trowbridge, operations manager at Gregory Feedlots near Tabor, Iowa, completed a CAB training seminar that included presentations on vaccinations, implant procedures, drug use and feeding management.

Trowbridge says the seminar emphasized the importance of recordkeeping to assure proper procedures are followed and provided demonstrations to back up lecture material. "It was a good overview of what has to be done to meet quality standards," he explains.

Another training tool is the "realizer animal" presentation by Fort Dodge Animal Health staff. Feedlot cattle are brought in 10-14 days prior to the demonstration for a series of both proper and improper management techniques. The cattle are euthanized on seminar day to provide a visual lesson about how handling techniques affect beef quality. Stika says this presentation has been a favorite because it provides a hands-on, visual approach to management techniques.

"It is an eye-opening experience for most participants," Stika says. "Hopefully, it makes them feel more accountable as to what is



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

The "realizer animal" presentation by Fort Dodge Animal Health provides a visual lesson about how handling techniques, particularly injections, affect beef quality.

going into vaccinations, implants and handling of animals."

Trowbridge says he has put many QA training ideas into practice. For example, he changed how cattle move through handling facilities at Gregory Feedlots since learning new practices from Grandin's presentation.

"Our veterinarian is also very aware of the correct site for each injection that is given and has been instructed to keep accurate records to show that the site date and amounts are maintained," Trowbridge says. "Implanting techniques, as well as the best use of different types of implants, has also been improved with QA training."

Putting it into practice

After becoming a CAB-licensed feedlot, managers must consider how quality and customer satisfaction goals can be met in their operations and implement those practices as smoothly as possible. Each licensed feedlot uses its own discretion and has the opportunity to determine what management practices define "quality" for their operation.

Trowbridge says his definition means that a product does not leave Gregory Feedlots unless it

is safe and as high in quality as possible.

"The job of quality assurance requires paying attention to detail and handling all management practices that show added focus on quality," Trowbridge explains. "Each employee knows their responsibility to maintain the high level of integrity that we enjoy. For example, our crew that maintains the health of the cattle keeps daily records of treatment and cattle movement so that all withdrawal requirements are met."

Wayne Smith, manager of Hergert Feeding Co. (HFC), Mitchell, Neb., says FLP staff work with licensed partners to improve handling methods at the feedlot level, which meet CAB goals of ensuring a superior, consistent branded product.

"Quality assurance means that I have done what I can to ensure that a consumer receives a uniform, consistently high-quality product with each purchase — whether they are dining at home or in a restaurant," Smith says. "It also means that my staff handles the



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At Gregory Feedlots, different types of cattle are fed different rations. Processing and marketing programs are customized to fit each pen, which involves a great deal of recordkeeping.

cattle in a proper, consistent and humane manner each and every time.”

Smith uses several new management strategies that focus on quality and consumer satisfaction. He says HFC takes a proactive approach by discussing information with clients regarding how the cattle should arrive at the feedlot. This includes individual identification (ID), preconditioning at home, proper vaccinations and injection sites. HFC also has introduced individual ID methods to its staff, and Smith says everybody follows feedlot and carcass performance.

“Having a high-quality staff is the most important thing in implementing quality assurance,” he says. “We have that here. We work together to make the necessary improvements. The staff at HFC is high-quality and has an interest in the clients and their cattle. They take pride in the part they play in our clients’ success.”

Shining examples

The variety of cattle-feeding operations makes each business unique, and CAB QA officers use their own methods for putting the shine on quality assurance. Stika says all partner feedlots do a great job of implementing BQA procedures, but he explains it is not the volume of cattle at a feedlot but the attention to detail that makes the difference in the level of quality.

“The attention to detail — timely submission of information and data and working with us by letting us know when the animals are to be processed — that’s what really separates one quality assurance officer from the next,” he says. “Open lines of communication are very important. How big that ‘Q’ in *quality* is depends on how much detail and communication is put forth.”

“You can never have too much communication — the more communication, the more probability of a successful data collection.”

— Turk Stovall

Stovall seconds that, but he adds some factors are beyond a feedlot partner’s control. “Through the CAB Feedlot Licensing Program, we feel that we can minimize the variables of getting carcass data. However, the QA officers can only initiate the process. They are the first ones who know what type of data needs to be collected and approximately when the cattle will be ready for harvest,” he says.

To ensure the commitment to quality, Stovall says successful QA officers form their own CAB team within their operation because, as the program grows, it becomes a challenge for one

person to keep track of increasing producer and company information.

“Time is money; and gathering, processing and analyzing data is a timely process,” Stovall says. “QA

officers need to stay on top of a timely turnaround because data isn’t very useful if the rest of the pen has already been harvested or the bulls are already turned out for the year.”

Every person on the CAB team at Gregory Feedlots knows their responsibility to maintain a high level of integrity, Trowbridge says. “Specific implant programs are developed for each pen of cattle to try to maintain high carcass quality and maximum performance,” he explains. “We utilize different rations for different types of cattle and try to customize processing and marketing programs for each pen of cattle. This all involves a great deal of recordkeeping that all employees contribute to.”

The key to quality

If there’s any one key to quality assurance, Stovall says, it’s communication. The FLP designed several forms, customized to fill the needs of QA officers and to communicate requests for carcass data to other personnel down the chain.

“You can never have too much communication — the more communication, the more probability of a successful data collection,” he says.

Smith agrees, and points to HFC’s successful program at the other end of feeding. He says working with HFC clients before the cattle arrive has helped their customers become more aware of the management practices necessary in the next step of beef production.

“The CAB staff in Ohio and Kansas have been very helpful in getting us set up to do the quality job necessary,” he says. “In turn, we need to keep our clients informed. The information highway definitely needs to be going in both directions.”

