

Blueprint



Beef quality assurance programs are offered in 26 states to help producers identify the day-to-day management practices that influence the production of safe, wholesome beef.

BY JANET MAYER

If you were part of the beef industry in 1991, you no doubt remember the first National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA). It told beef producers the disheartening news that the U.S. beef supply was too fat, too inconsistent and too tough to remain competitive. Cattlemen faced a seemingly

long list of insurmountable challenges — and if they weren't met, the market would continue to slide.

The 1995 audit revealed a mixed bag of successes and continued product-quality shortcomings. It made the beef industry even more aware that beef producers, packers,

processors, retailers, consumers, and those in the education and science communities must communicate and collaborate to return beef to a position of strength.

Since that time, efforts to keep the industry viable and progressive in a competitive, consumer-driven marketplace

have been ongoing. Moving rapidly away from the commodity marketplace of the past to the value-added marketplace of the future, the industry as a whole is becoming more responsive to a consumer who increasingly demands beef that is consistent and flavorful, as well as nutritious and safe.

Changes that may have started as a ripple 10 years ago have become the wave of the future as the genetics used by seedstock producers move to the feeder and the packer.

In the process, many beef producers have found a helping hand through such programs as the beef quality assurance (BQA) program initiated by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) in 1982 as a blueprint for total quality management (TQM) in the beef industry.

Many people affiliated with the beef industry believe certifications such as BQA will someday be mandatory. In the meantime, BQA is offered in 26 states to help producers identify the day-to-day management practices that influence the production of safe, wholesome beef.

Although procedures may vary from state to state, certification is usually a simple matter of attending a two-part training session — one part in a classroom and one chuteside. Topics covered include proper and safe animal health product and food safety measures, environmental management, recordkeeping, and sampling procedures for feed and feed ingredients.

Pennsylvania example

"Beef quality assurance is everyone's job," says Wendall Landis, Pennsylvania director of BQA and the Blueprint for Success for Feeding Quality Assured Cattle (or Blueprint Program), a relatively new venture to aid feedlot operators in Pennsylvania. "I was

Wendall Landis (center) congratulates two recently certified producers. Landis originally was hired to head Pennsylvania's Blueprint Program for feeders. He soon decided to take the next step and offer the BQA program to cow-calf producers. "Beef quality assurance is everyone's job," he says.

originally hired to head the Blueprint Program, but after I started working with producers, we decided to take the next step and offer the BQA program; they mesh together very nicely.”

More than 600 cow-calf producers and feedlot owners have participated in the BQA program, and interest in the Blueprint Program is increasing.

Although the programs work well together and cover some of the same materials, BQA is offered to people involved in all areas of beef production, while the Blueprint Program is geared more specifically toward those feeding cattle.

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, the Pennsylvania Cattlemen’s Association and the Pennsylvania Beef Council fund the BQA program. Its mission is to strengthen — through the use of science, research and educational initiatives — consumer confidence in beef by focusing the industry’s attention on the strategies that promote beef quality and safety.

The Blueprint Program differs from BQA in that it is designed to help improve the profitability of cattle feeders and to provide assistance to those considering expansion. The Pennsylvania State University animal science department and the Pennsylvania Beef Council sponsor it.

A working committee of representatives from Penn State Extension, Moyer Packing Co. (MoPac) and representatives from all aspects of the state’s beef cattle industry initiated the Blueprint Program in 1999. The initial purpose of the group was to list the specific management and animal factors that would improve the value of fed cattle for producers, packers and consumers in the state.

The objectives set down in the program were to increase the long-term competitiveness and consumer value of cattle fed for slaughter using prescribed

management practices. Another objective was to increase the number of cattle fed in Pennsylvania that met consumer demand for consistency, quality and value.

Diversified needs

Landis, who previously worked for Agri-Basics Inc., a nutritional consulting company in northeast Pennsylvania, was hired to direct the Blueprint



Program in February 2000. He quickly found locating the state’s numerous feedlots a challenge in itself as there was not a master list to consult. Looking through Extension lists and other livestock reference

sources, he began to realize that the feedlots were diversified and fed varying numbers of cattle, ranging from 20 to 3,000.

“At first I was calling feedlot owners and asking them if I could meet with them,” Landis recalls. “It was a slow start, as in any new program, because people want to see how it will do, and it takes a while to get credibility built up. As much as the Blueprint Program has been publicized, there are still a lot of people who haven’t heard about the program. However, the BQA sessions I conduct are giving me more exposure, and now people are calling me to come to their feedlots.”

His goal has been to visit every cattle feeder in the state and, on a one-to-one basis, to evaluate aspects of the operation, working with the producer to identify areas for improvement.

To achieve this, Landis visits a feedlot and reviews data with the owner on feeder-cattle selection, health information, growth-promoting implants, nutrition, bunk management, facilities and ventilation, manure management, financial management, marketing, and sources of profit and loss.

The evaluation takes about two hours. The survey includes about 85 questions, most having yes or no answers.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 214



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The BQA sessions conducted for cow-calf producers are giving more exposure to the Blueprint Program geared toward feedlots.

“We try to personalize the program to meet the needs of the cattle feeders,” Landis explains. “After the evaluation, I may make suggestions and ask permission to bring in another individual who specializes in an area that particular feeder may need help with. We are blessed in this state with many talented industry people who have the expertise to help the cattle feeders be successful. My role is to be the liaison, working for the producer.”

The program is a voluntary educational program, and participants are not required to follow Landis’s suggestions. All the information gathered about an operation is strictly confidential and used for the program records and to compile averages to establish benchmarks for the state’s cattle-feeding industry.

Common areas of concern

As Landis has visited feedlots, he has found recordkeeping to be a major issue, with the larger feedlots keeping better records than the smaller ones. He emphasizes that accurate records are a necessary part of the operation, not only to show if the operation is making a profit, but also to provide solid information to cow-calf suppliers for making genetic improvements at the seedstock level.

“I always tell the owners to make sure all cattle are tagged for easier identification,” he says. “This can certainly make accurate recordkeeping a lot simpler.

“I believe that documentation equals marketability, and it also provides the feeders with some liability protection,” he continues. “If there is a safety factor with the end product, and the fault is not with the retailer or the packer, then the feeder had better believe they are going to backtrack to his or her feedlot, and they had better have

records on what they have been doing, or they will be left holding the bag.”

Inadequate handling facilities in many feedlots is another area Landis finds that needs attention. He emphasizes proper handling facilities as a vital part of any cattle management plan, not only to reduce stress on both the handler and the cattle, but also to facilitate treatment opportunities and to aid sorting. Proper handling also can reduce bruising of the cattle, which in the long run influences carcass values.

Since most packers are looking for carcasses in the range of 700 to 900 pounds (lb.), Landis advises feedlot owners to get a good livestock scale if they don’t already own one. The initial expense may seem excessive, but the scale will pay for itself by offsetting discounts for light or heavy cattle.

Is there a payoff?

Feedlot owners often ask Landis if they will receive a premium for their cattle if they follow the Blueprint Program.

“Unfortunately, I have to give them an answer they don’t want to hear,” he says. “As much as I would love to be able to tell them ‘yes,’ at this point I am forced to tell them ‘no.’ However, I do tell them by following the guidelines outlined in the program, they can avoid practices that cause their cattle to be discounted and, combined with BQA certification, they will have the tools and a better understanding of what the packer expects.

“I believe as we move forward, packers will have to recognize the efforts of forward-thinking cattle producers and their superior cattle. And by learning and working together to produce quality, we make a priceless contribution to the beef industry as a whole.”



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10 benchmarks for Pennsylvania’s Blueprint Program

1. Carcasses with a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) quality grade of Choice or better to reach and to exceed consumer’s “window of acceptability.”
2. A carcass weight of 700-900 pounds (lb.) to help ensure tenderness, quality and portion sizes acceptable to consumers.
3. A Yield Grade of 1, 2 or 3 to reduce fat, to make beef more visually attractive and to influence tenderness and consistency.
4. No distinguishing dairy or Brahman characteristics. Identify breed and feeding systems for premium programs that address eating quality, value, safety and nutrition.
5. Fed high-energy feed for at least 120 days to meet consumer demands for uniformity and flavor.
6. Healthy cattle that produce safe and desirable beef.
7. Carcasses free of blemishes that may detract from consumer value, and ensure appropriate animal husbandry practices.
8. Less than 24 months of age at slaughter to positively influence tenderness and high consumer demand.
9. High growth rate with desirable feed conversion to make more efficient use of feed, water and land resources and to reduce production of animal wastes
10. Produced in environmentally friendly conditions that target excellent animal welfare and positive community relations.