

# A New Breed of BQA

Many pharmaceutical companies offer beef quality assurance (BQA) programs, but are they enough?

by Jennifer Ryan

**“T**he importance of beef quality assurance can be seen when analyzing the top eight quality challenges within the beef industry,” says Dee Griffin, a professor and veterinarian specializing in beef production medicine and management at the University of Nebraska. “These quality challenges would include injection-site blemishes, rib brands, excessive external fat, excessive seam fat, dark cutters, inconsistent size of meat cuts, inconsistent cuts and nonuniform cattle.”



According to the National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA), injection-site blemishes cost the beef industry \$188 million annually and cost producers approximately \$7.05/animal. Brands and other hide defects, such as parasite damage, cost the beef industry more than \$648 million annually. Typically, this loss is passed along to all cattle that are sold in the industry by a reduction in live-cattle price. This is the equivalent of \$24.30/head, Griffin says.

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Beef Quality Assurance Program (BQAP) management tactics for overcoming beef's quality shortcomings include eliminating side and multiple brands, removing horns, improving parasite control, improving red-meat yield, improving handling and transport techniques, eliminating intramuscular (IM) injections, and measuring traits that affect value and that eliminate genetic and management systems that erode tenderness, juiciness and flavor, Griffin says.

In an effort to help producers and to add value to their products, pharmaceutical companies are offering beef quality assurance (BQA) programs of all types and sizes.

## Vet-certified

On Jan. 31, Merial introduced its SureHealth Program to help producers capture more value from husbandry practices.

“Our program is different in that it is vet-certified and offers a wealth of information for our customers,” says Richard Jenkins, associate director of cow-calf marketing at Merial.

The SureHealth Program offers protocols for preweaned calves,

weaned calves, heifers, cows and bulls. All protocols stipulate that participating producers use Merial products.

The programs concentrate on parasite control, vaccination programs, best management practices (BMPs), and selection and breeding practices. To participate in the program, producers must enroll their cattle and specify when the necessary procedures will be performed. Then a veterinarian must evaluate and approve or change the producer's specifications. The enrolled cattle are then entered into a clearinghouse and given a SureHealth certificate.

“Our program has certified value built in. We're actively working on the demand side, not just the supply side,” Jenkins says.

Purchasers may specify the protocols in the AgSpan marketing system, which is an Internet-based cattle market that connects feeder-calf buyers and sellers. The system offers a similar veterinary health assurance service.

## Beef Friendly

Pfizer also has a BQA program of its own — the Beef Friendly Guide. The program operates from the “do no harm” motto, says John Pollreiz, senior veterinarian with the company's veterinary services.

The program concentrates on minimizing injection-site damage to cattle for “safe and effective product administration” as the program's motto says. The Beef Friendly Guide for beef cattle builds on five points: choose Beef Friendly products that can be injected subcutaneously (sub-Q) whenever possible, choose the right needle for the job, select the correct injection site, use the proper injection technique and keep detailed records.

Pollreiz says the most common mistakes producers make are putting medications in the wrong spot, using improper equipment or putting too much medication in the animal. Pfizer's program insists on having a veterinarian as the first link in the information chain, and Pollreiz says that distinguishes it from other companies' BQA programs.

“It varies with producers on what type of information would help them most effectively administer a program,” he adds.

## Caution: Not comprehensive coverage

Beef quality assurance (BQA) programs offered through pharmaceutical companies don't necessarily follow the national BQA guidelines, says Dee Griffin, a professor and veterinarian specializing in beef production medicine and management at the University of Nebraska.

“At the very least, companies pick and choose from the national BQA guidelines and standards or reinterpret the national BQA guidelines to fit their companies' sales needs,” he says. They typically are not as comprehensive as the national BQA guidelines.

“For instance, pharmaceutical companies want to stress both injection-site damage and withdrawal time. Biologic manufacturers want to principally stress injection-site damage. Neither wants to include materials on feedstuffs,” Griffin says. “Feed manufacturers only stress feed-related QA guidelines. An approved BQA program includes all the guidelines.”

NCBA's national guidelines and standards are recognized by all U.S. governmental agencies as an acceptable part of the U.S. national food safety initiative — guidelines used by the government in trade negotiations. International and domestic trade both require food to be produced and processed under Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) certification. HACCP has a set of defined standard operating procedures (SOP), and the national BQA guidelines have been accepted as the “preharvest” procedures for HACCP, Griffin explains.

“Presently, feedlots are being asked to sign a verification notice that the cattle they offer for sale have met approved BQA guidelines,” he says.

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The Beef Friendly Program provides goals for producers and Pfizer, says Gloria Basse, director of cattle marketing for the company.

“It provides a concentrated goal to continuously promote BQA, not just to customers, but to the research end of it, too,” Basse says.

The company also promotes its SelectVac Program, which tracks producers’ implementation of vaccination and parasite control. The program advises producers to use Pfizer products, but the main goal is to use a program at the right time and place, Basse says.

“We’ve tracked calf sales, and it really does get more value for the animals,” she maintains.

### **Critical control points**

Another BQA program available to producers is the Quality Assurance Critical Control Points Program offered through Fort Dodge Animal Health.

The program is a marriage of the national BQAP and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP), says Frank Prouty, Fort Dodge’s director of technical services.

The program concentrates on reducing animal handling stress at processing times, reducing injury rates from improper processing techniques, training animal handlers in correct procedures and educating producers about biosecurity issues, Prouty says.

“This is not new science,” he explains. “There are a lot of great BQA programs out there, but they’re not used in day-to-day operations. We want to get these concepts ingrained into the mentality of the people who handle the animals and the management.”

Fort Dodge personnel or veterinary consultants measure the results of the program through observation. Prouty says the program has reduced injury rates from improper processing techniques and increased dry-matter intake (DMI) following processing, which increases the animal’s rate of gain.

The program does not require producers to use Fort Dodge products exclusively because that would be impractical, Prouty says.

“Most companies are profit-driven, and we have to deliver something to our shareholders,” Prouty says. “It’s the same with producers — you have to have the bottom-line incentive. This program does cost us money, and we do expect to do some business from it, but it builds a better relationship between the company and the customer. Fort Dodge is trying to do something other than sell products.”



**Editor’s note:** *Jennifer Ryan is a senior in agricultural journalism at Kansas State University and a participant in our Young Guns Student Writers Program.*