



PHOTO BY PAGE NELSON

## BQA: Industry Standard

*Once a foreign name to producers, Beef Quality Assurance is now the industry standard taught in classrooms and across generations of cattlemen.*

*by Lindsay King, assistant editor*

Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) combines common-sense husbandry practices with sound scientific research to raise cattle in optimal conditions, both from a management and environmental standpoint. The primary goal of BQA is to rebuild beef demand through responsible management practices as a result of training and subsequent certification.

“BQA was first developed in the 1980s and early 1990s when there were a lot of quality defects noticed on the harvest floor as a result of management techniques,” says Chase DeCoite, director of BQA for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), a contractor to the Beef Checkoff. “There was a lot of bruising and injection-site lesions as well as residues, it was negatively affecting the profit of the producer and the eating experience of the

consumer as well as their perception of the beef industry.”

Now more than ever, consumers want reassurance that the highest standards of care and welfare are being used to raise the cattle producing their beef products. This has led producers to embrace the BQA program to strengthen and increase the demand for and confidence in U.S. beef.

Implementing and executing BQA programs is a cooperative effort between the NCBA and state BQA programs across the nation.

“We are a nationally coordinated

and state-implemented program,” DeCoite says. “Each coordinator works with us as we develop programs and resources. Their job is to be the boots on the ground and reach producers. They provide the knowledge base for their area. We bring them together twice a year to share knowledge and approaches for issues that come up in various areas. We work with them very closely throughout the year.”

BQA was first developed because producers were concerned the government would step into the beef industry and develop a one-size-fits-all approach to producing beef. The NCBA knew this would be detrimental to the industry, and so BQA was born.

“As an industry-led effort, we knew that we could make advancements more quickly for producers,” DeCoite



says. "That ensured the supply chain that beef was going to improve. We have decreased the occurrence of injection-site lesions by more than 75% from the time BQA first started."

Every five years the National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA) is conducted to evaluate improvements and pitfalls in all segments of the beef industry. Started in 1991, the audit reports on issues that ultimately impact demand for beef products.



### Why BQA?

"Our program is designed for producers; they are committed to continuous improvement and BQA is the channel to achieve that," DeCoite says. "It is for producers by producers. It improves their operations and ultimately their bottom line but also it is a commitment to responsible cattle care that consumers can trust. Our job is to communicate that for them. But it is designed to be an educational program for producers."

Becoming BQA certified can be done one of two ways in most states: in-person training or online modules found at [BQA.org](http://BQA.org). The state BQA coordinator will be present for the in-person training usually hosted by a local cattlemen's association or a vet clinic. With a minor assessment for each module, certification is virtually a painless process with massive benefits for producers and consumers alike.

"We continue to evolve and grow," DeCoite says. "In the last year we have had over 30,000 people enroll for the online training along with thousands of others completing in-person training. We are seeing

ourselves work with retailers more closely to tell them about how producers are growing cattle responsibly. We constantly update and improve our training modules."

BQA resources are revised every three years to remain a relevant tool for continuous improvement. The advisory board is comprised of industry leaders representing stakeholders in the supply chain. "The board works together to develop tools and resources state

coordinators use to execute the program," DeCoite adds. "There are different modules based off of each sector, each touching on details specific to things associated with the area that segment of the chain is typically located in. Coordinators are also great resources for location-specific situations."

### Industry standard

After 27 years, BQA is more of an industry standard than the specialized training it started as. The curriculum shows up in college classrooms, 4-H and FFA quality assurance trainings as well as conversations between today's producers as well as the next generation of cattlemen.

"BQA production practices have become such industry standards that many don't even realize that they are actually BQA practices," DeCoite muses. "They have weaved themselves into the classroom, so by the time folks are becoming producers they are everyday practices for them. This is how they know how to raise beef."

Young producers just now learning about the program are

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excited about the possibilities and quickly adopt, according to DeCoite. An overwhelming number of certifications from the online resources are given to young producers, many who are breaking into the cattle industry.

“BQA has integrated itself so deeply that it is the standard,” DeCoite says. “When I started at NCBA and took hold of this program, I looked at the guidelines and realized that is how I was taught to raise cattle. There was nothing new about BQA to me, and I think it is good that we are at that stage today. The procedures are so entrenched today that folks are doing the right thing by following BQA procedures.”

Some producers require BQA certification of employees before hiring — Deseret Land and Citrus, St. Cloud, Fla., being one of them.

“I first heard about BQA certification through classes in the animal science department at Oklahoma State University (OSU),” says Corban Hemphill, an OSU alum and now graduate student in the department. “It was recommended that we become certified as a way to boost our resumes. And then I was required to be certified before interning for Deseret.”

Hemphill’s master’s program advisor also requires students to become certified before they begin working with the university’s research herds.

“It is a way to ensure producers are at least aware of scientifically sound and humane ways of raising cattle,” Hemphill says. “If someone is BQA certified, then you know

their operation should meet certain standards of quality when it comes to livestock handling practices.”

For Hemphill and his major advisor, becoming certified is a way to show consumers and producers they are serious about proper cattle care. For students and young producers, it can also give an

seeking these operations out on their own to supply their meat.

## It’s what people want

“We do not believe that animal welfare should be a differentiator in the grocery aisle, that being a label,” DeCoite says. “The highest levels of cattle health and well-being should be a standard all producers are held to. We just want to share with consumers how deep BQA runs through our industry and that we are doing the right thing.”

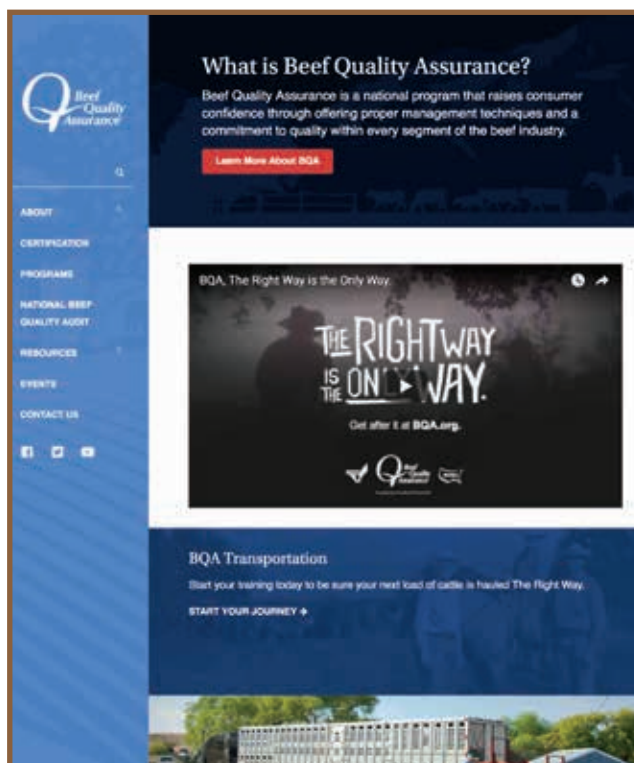
The national food chain, Wendy’s, specifically sources their beef from BQA-certified programs, though it is never seen marketed in restaurants.

“McDonald’s and a lot of other food service and retail partners are looking at the BQA program because they believe it answers a lot of their questions about animal care,” DeCoite adds.

The structure of the BQA program is simple: share cutting-edge, common-sense practices backed by science with

everyone in the industry to level the playing field. Producers are encouraged to become certified simply because “it is the right thing to do.”

“It is always important to remind producers that becoming BQA certified is the first step to continuous improvement,” DeCoite urges. “[BQA certification] can revolutionize their operation through minute management changes. And it helps the industry as a whole share our positive story to consumers — the industry is committed to continuous improvement and responsible cattle care.” **AJ**



*Becoming BQA certified can be done one of two ways: in-person training or online modules found at BQA.org.*

employer confidence their potential employee is serious about the cattle business and keeping high standards.

“By following BQA practices, beef consumers and buyers can be certain that product meets a specified quality standard,” Hemphill adds.

An article by CattleFax found that BQA-certified operations annually returned higher profits from their cattle. Following the BQA practices better prepared cattle for market, resulting in the increased profit margins over operations who were not certified. Even though animals raised on BQA-certified operations are not labeled, some companies are