

Adding value to your veterinary practice with producer education resources

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Abstract

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Producer Education team works on the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) and other Beef Checkoff-funded programs each day to ensure cattle producers have industry leading information and resources. Veterinarians can use these resources to build on new or existing producer relationships to enhance the care and productivity of the operation. These opportunities not only add value to your practice, but they also reinforce livestock veterinarians' dedication to healthy animals and a safe food supply. It is important not only to the producer and veterinarian, but to the industry as a whole, that cattle are responsibly handled and transported, and welfare of the animal is always a priority. Several resources developed by the Producer Education team at NCBA are available for producers, veterinarians, and transporters to review for more information on cattle welfare. Producers and veterinarians are encouraged to review the tools and resources, get certified in BQA, and ensure they are following best management practices for cattle in their care. It is important that the education producers, veterinarians, and transporters receive is current and up to date, but not all groups have the time or resources to leave their operation.

Key words: Beef Quality Assurance, BQA, producer education

Introduction

A responsible management approach can bring positive benefits to the cattle producer including improved resource management and positive returns. Veterinarians are integral to the implementation of the BQA principles and have many opportunities to collaborate with producers to improve their production systems from pasture to plate. For decades, the beef supply chain has adopted and implemented Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP)-like programs to ensure food safety and reduce product defects in the food chain.²

The USDA mandated that all meat packing and processing plants develop and implement these HACCP programs in the 1990s. Industry groups then took initiative in developing voluntary safety and quality assurance programs for pre-harvest segments of the industry. One result was the Beef Checkoff-funded National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA).^{3,4} Conducted every 5 years since 1991, the NBQA is a comprehensive survey that

evaluates beef industry efforts to improve beef quality. Results of this survey provided the platform for the BQA Program and highlight what management tools could be applied to improve beef quality, food safety, and beef production.^{2,5}

Across the beef supply chain, companies are seeking cattle producers and business partners that demonstrate similar, more consistent management philosophies, further ensuring the safety and quality of products leaving their facilities. Adoption of BQA principles helps position cattle raisers to take advantage of these opportunities. Additionally, implementing BQA can help producers avoid costly production mistakes and unacceptable production defects. Participation in the BQA program is one way to show customers, whether they are cattle buyers or beef consumers, that producers take every possible step to raise beef responsibly. Seen as a total management system, each aspect of a BQA program is economically logical and part of good business management.

National Beef Quality Audit

The NBQA allows the beef industry to evaluate progress and assess areas of emphasis for the BQA program.⁵ It serves as a beef industry "scorecard" and tracks where we are as an industry as it relates to beef quality. Moreover, the NBQA helps evaluate the effectiveness of the BQA program and inform any changes or updates that need to be made to the educational resources of the program. Based on the 2016 Market Cow & Bull Audit results,³ there are areas of potential improvement that cattle producers and veterinarians could focus on to improve animal welfare and meat quality aspects for the upcoming audit.

This important audit provides management tactics to help overcome reported beef quality shortcomings. These include the reduction of side and multiple brands, proper cattle handling/transport techniques and facility design, and the reduction of improper IM injections.^{3,4,5} Proper administration of animal health products, branding only on the hip area (if required by law), marketing cattle at an optimum time, and reducing stress when handling cattle are just some of the management practices that can help prevent quality defects and increase market value.

Two studies were completed during the latest audit in 2016 – the Steer and Heifer report⁴ and the Market Cow and Bull report.³ Together these audits indicate that dairy breeds contribute approximately 20% of the nation's beef supply

so focus on BQA principles can be applied to both the beef and dairy industries. Food safety, which has been ranked as the top priority in the past few audits, is recognized as being critical to doing good business across all sectors of the beef industry.

Timeliness in marketing animals is of the utmost importance in all cattle sectors and especially where travel times are anticipated to be high. Critically evaluating fitness to transport for each animal will decrease travel stress and potential for adverse animal welfare outcomes during transport or at the terminal market. Education and training opportunities between the herd veterinarian and farm management and workers will be important to improving these marketing decisions to benefit the animal, farm, and food supply.

Beef Quality Assurance

The goal of the Beef Checkoff-funded national Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program is to enhance the desirability of beef by educating producers and veterinarians on best management practices that improve economic sustainability of farms and ranches and provide consumers with a safe and wholesome beef supply.² The nationally coordinated, state implemented program partners with state BQA programs across the country who organize and execute BQA training and certification opportunities in their state. Online BQA training is also available and provides 24/7 access to the program. Four online courses are available (cow/calf, stocker/backgrounder, feedyard, and BQA Transportation) to deliver a program that most closely aligns with the individual's operation and goals. Throughout the country, hundreds of thousands have now become BQA-certified through in-person and online training, with an estimated 85% of the US fed beef supply now sourced from operations with BQA certified management.

Over the last 5 years, the BQA program has partnered with other industry initiatives to better extend resources to audiences that have been traditionally difficult to reach. These include the National Dairy Farmers Assuring Responsible Management (FARM) Program for dairy producers and the Youth for the Quality Care of Animals program (YCQA) which reaches 4-H, FFA, and youth producers with a multispecies quality assurance program curriculum. Three modules (cow/calf, stocker/backgrounder, and feedyard) are also available in Spanish to better expand outreach.

In 2020, the BQA program received important international distinction from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding the program's animal welfare standards. The USDA reviewed and certified that the BQA program complies with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) Animal Welfare Management/General Requirements and Guidance for Organizations in the Food Supply Chain.¹ Producers and veterinarians adhering to BQA animal care and welfare guidelines, collectively show the US cattle industry's commitment to advancing animal welfare.

Beef Quality Assurance Transportation

Consumer research has shown that consumers are more interested than ever about how and where their food is raised. As a result, being BQA certified has become increasingly important to all members of the supply chain, including packers. Some packers have only been receiving cattle from livestock haulers that are BQAT certified since January 1, 2020. Due to the demand for greater BQA uptake from transporters, more BQAT training sessions have been offered by state and national BQA educators over the past few years, thanks to a partnership with Cargill.

The Beef Quality Assurance Transportation (BQAT) program was launched in the fall of 2017. It provides online training modules to educate producers and transporters on handling and transporting cattle using BQA principles. Shipping can be one of the most stressful times in an animal's life. Greater amounts of stress on cattle being shipped may increase the percentage of shrink loss of the animal or incidence of disease at the next production phase. If producers and transporters use techniques and practices covered in the BQAT program and reduce shrink during transportation by 1%, this alone would benefit the industry by more than \$325 million.

Resources

The combination of new training and certification modules, new partnerships for expanded reach of the BQA program, and the diligent efforts of state BQA coordinators has resulted in increasing numbers of documented BQA certifications. Instrumental in this education are several user-friendly resources available to cattle producers and veterinarians produced by the BQA program.² Veterinarians serve as key assets for producers with advising on many aspects of the operation such as animal health and welfare, nutrition, biosecurity, and general consulting questions. These BQA resources can serve as a template for evaluating the operation's activities and discovering potential areas of improvement.

BQA Daily Biosecurity Plan for Disease Prevention

Daily biosecurity practices include some of the most important steps to protecting the cattle herd. Released in late 2020, the BQA Daily Biosecurity Plan for Disease Prevention template is designed so cattle producers can customize plans to their own operation. This flexibility allows producers and their resource team to evaluate what management practices work best for their situation. From animal movement and worker training to pest control, the tool includes all aspects that should be considered. As the herd veterinarian, working through this stepwise plan with your producers provides a unique opportunity to evaluate each operation thoroughly and collaborate on ideas to improve the operation. Involvement of other resources such as an extension agent, state

BQA coordinator, and/or other resources about biosecurity preparedness could also be beneficial.

BQA collaborated with the USDA-funded Secure Beef Supply Plan,⁵ an established resource for disease response training, to ensure similar language and completeness. This helps when an operation moves to an enhanced biosecurity plan, which is necessary during a potential foreign animal disease outbreak. The producer already has some of the biosecurity steps in place from the daily template. Livestock veterinarians are essential to recognizing potential disease outbreaks on farms, at livestock markets, or at the packing plant and play an important role in a safe food supply. These biosecurity plans can improve preparedness and awareness of potential biosecurity threats in addition to building a trusting relationship with each producer.

Additional Resources

- *National BQA Manual*: Comprehensive backbone of the program, re-launched in 2019
- *Online BQA and BQAT Certification Modules*
- *BQA Field Guide*: Downloadable, quick reference guide that covers key points of the BQA Program, launched in 2020
- *BQAT Manual*: Essential information for cattle haulers and transporters, launched in early 2021
- *Cow/Calf Assessment*: Self-assessment guide designed to help producers benchmark operations in various areas
- *Feedyard Assessment*: Another self-assessment guide for farmer/feeders or feedyard operations, newest version will provide step by step preparation for the Feedyard Audit, expected launch 2021
- *U.S. Cattle Industry Feedyard Audit*: Audit was completed as part of NCBA's policy funded producer education work and is certified by the Professional Animal Auditor Certification Organization (PAACO) and is based on BQA principles, launched in 2020⁶
- *Online BQA Advanced Education Module on Biosecurity*: New advanced education topic provides foundational information on understanding biosecurity principles, developing a daily biosecurity plan,

introduction of the Secure Beef Supply plan, and training opportunities presented in an interactive module, launched in early 2021

Conclusion

With the cattle industry continuously looking to improve everyday practices on the farm or ranch, it is important producers have the most up-to-date information and resources. The Producer Education team at NCBA strives to continue developing and providing applicable resources for cattle producers across all sectors. To learn more about the National BQA program, its producer friendly educational resources, and the National Beef Quality Audit, visit www.BQA.org.

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