

National Cattlemen's Beef Association: Feedlot Assessment Program

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Abstract

The NCBA Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program was started in the 1980s, and emphasizes such things as residue avoidance, proper injections, beef quality and animal well-being. Widespread educational programs have resulted in good producer and veterinary buy-in. The complete BQA program is both broad and complex, and all people working with cattle must know and understand it. In order to determine understanding and compliance with the program, the cattle industry has developed the Beef Quality Assurance Feedyard Assessment. This detailed document provides the framework for assessing BQA practices in a feedyard, and as a result the feedyard management can identify strengths, weaknesses and areas that need improvement to satisfy BQA standards. This document will be showcased and released to the industry at the January 2009 National Cattlemen's Beef Association Annual Conference and Trade Show in Phoenix, Arizona.

Résumé

Le programme d'assurance de la qualité du bœuf de la NCBA (BQA) a été établi dans les années 80 et met l'accent sur la réduction des résidus, les injections adéquates, la qualité du bœuf et le bien-être animal. Des programmes d'éducation à grand déploiement font en sorte que les vétérinaires et les producteurs sont bien perçus. Le programme BQA complet est à la fois étendu et complexe et tous les gens qui travaillent avec le bétail doivent le connaître et bien le comprendre. Afin de déterminer le degré de compréhension et d'adhérence au programme, l'industrie du bétail a développé un outil d'évaluation sur l'assurance de la qualité du bœuf dans les parcs d'engraissement. Ce document détaillé fournit un cadre afin d'évaluer les pratiques BQA dans un parc d'engraissement qui permettrait aux régisseurs du parc d'identifier les forces, les faiblesses et les aspects qui nécessitent une mise à niveau pour satisfaire les standards BQA. Ce document sera mis de l'avant et présenté à l'industrie en janvier 2009 à la conférence annuelle du National Cattlemen's Beef Association à Phoenix, Arizona.

Introduction

I would like to begin with a little background information on the NCBA Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) Feedyard Assessment Program. As many of you know, the BQA program was started in the early 1980s. Cattlemen throughout the nation were concerned that they would lose modern production tools they had come to rely on to improve the health and well-being of cattle. They began investigating ways to ensure that their production practices were safe and would pass consumer scrutiny. In 1982, USDA-FSIS began working with the beef industry to develop the Pre-harvest Beef Safety Production Program. Not wanting any additional governmental regulatory programs, the beef industry developed and adopted the Beef Quality Assurance Program. Stepping forward a few more years, between 1982 and 1985, three feedlots began evaluating their production practices and with the help of the USDA-FSIS, found ways to assess the residue risks. Then in the late 1980s, the industry had a problem with injection sites in the top butt area and responded by moving the injections to the neck area. Lastly, we have all been taught the concepts of HACCP all our lives. It is a process of determining what could go wrong, a plan to avoid it, and document what we have done. The one additional step is validation; thus, the birth of the NCBA BQA Feedyard Assessment program. The one major difference with this new program is that we are attempting to be proactive. As you can see from the history of our BQA program, we were mostly in a reactive mode. We feel this is a giant step for our feedyard industry to move forward in a proactive mode to quantitatively measure the entire BQA program with a new cattle well-being and stockmanship component.

In November 2007, a group of 14 beef producers met in Amarillo, Texas to start developing a national program that we now know as the Beef Quality Assurance Feedyard Assessment program. We need to give a lot of credit to the Texas Cattle Feeders Association (TCFA). TCFA has been conducting these audits for their member yards for over five years. It was the goal of the group to develop a program that could be used nationwide and fully incorporate the entire BQA program. The program is basically a merger of the entire BQA program and the

Livestock Care and Handling Guidelines developed by NCBA members and published in 2006.

When we started to introduce this program, some asked why we were heading down this avenue. If you ever conduct an Internet search of topics such as animal welfare, cattle welfare, the websites that you initially find should be quite disturbing. There are lots of activist groups out there that are very well financed and unfriendly to animal agriculture. In addition, many of these groups are willing to share their very biased information on a regular basis with our customer, the housewife that makes the food-buying decisions or worse yet, the young school-age children.

It is a goal of our group that this assessment will be accepted by all sectors of our industry including food service, retail, packing industry and most importantly, the consumers. If you have ever been around a feedlot, you should realize they are dealing with audits from various fronts all the time. We hope that this audit can be the one recognized by all interested parties.

The BQA program has always been a producer driven, voluntary program and we want it to remain that way. However, most all of us agree that it is time to find ways to validate in a quantitative manner that we are following the concepts of BQA and cattle welfare. The assessment/audit that we have developed can be utilized in feedyards today to help the operations measure their present status and find areas that need assistance. However, we need to have the program developed so that whoever conducts the audit, no matter their familiarity with our industry, can evaluate a facility fairly and accurately. To do this, on many occasions we had to change our thought processes to find ways to quantitatively audit the facility.

Moving forward to the actual on-site assessment process, we tried to design the form so that it could flow from one area of the feedlot to another. Outside of the first two areas, there are not any points that are actually a pass-fail. The areas on animal abuse or animal neglect actually are an absolute pass-fail, for obvious reasons. The next 18 points encompass the protocols. We feel that training and protocols are important to overall cattle management. We are asking for protocols in the areas of animal handling, downer cattle, euthanasia, health protocols, pharmaceutical storage, residue avoidance, medicated feed, and emergency action plan, to name a few. In the assessment manual, we are going to have some generic protocols available for operations to use, or they can develop their own. When we developed the assessment guide, we felt that asking for protocols from several key areas of the BQA program made the most sense. Since it was our goal to be able to audit a facility in four to six hours, the request for protocols and training documentation will allow this to happen. This approach also follows the HACCP process of train, observe, plan, and document.

Even before the issue of improper handling of non-ambulatory cattle and euthanasia became the "hot button" issue that it is today, we felt this was a major point of emphasis in the audit process. Thankfully, since handling of non-ambulatory animals is an uncommon practice in our feedlots, we have to utilize the auditing of protocols and employee training in these areas. As an auditor, we can ask for the protocols but also visit with the employees in a casual situation to make sure they are all engaged and properly trained on the handling of non-ambulatory animals and proper euthanasia techniques. If we listened to news outlets on several occasions recently, we could assume that this happens all the time and we are faced with these types of animals on a regular basis, which we all know is not the case.

The next several areas on the assessment involve auditing cattle-handling processes and facility maintenance. As with all areas of the program, we had to avoid generic words such as "sufficient, adequate, properly and comfortable", since these words mean different things to different people. We had to base our auditing points on areas that can be numerically or quantitatively measured. Through the use of quantitative measurements, we can measure improvement or deterioration in manageable areas. If we do not properly measure our production, sooner or later the normal can become unacceptable. The benchmarks we are using were not arbitrarily chosen; rather, we utilized industry experts in cattle handling such as Drs. Grandin, Noffsinger and Locatelli, to name a few.

When we are auditing actual cattle stockmanship, we utilize electric prod use, falling, stumbling, jumping and running upon exit of chute, miscaught heads, and cattle vocalizing as the measurement parameters. We look at these areas as a way to evaluate the entire cattle-working process. If the handler clear in the back of the processing area is improperly handling the cattle, it can affect several other areas on the audit. This is also the way we can evaluate and educate proper techniques for monitoring and benchmarking progress by the entire crew.

We then move to auditing of the operations facilities. Through the auditing of stocking rate, pen conditions, water supply, and feed bunks, we are able to measure cattle comfort and facility management in a quantitative manner. As I stated above, we had to find a way to physically measure these areas and take personal judgments out of the equation. Non-slip flooring and facility maintenance are also evaluated in all cattle-handling areas. The one area the group really struggled with was monitoring pen condition. Some of the other audits utilize hide mud scores to evaluate pen condition and maintenance. As a group, we felt this was not a quantitative measurement for the facility for several reasons. First of all, once mud is present on the hide of the legs or belly, it can still be

present weeks or longer after a weather event. Secondly, in the summer, 90% of the pen can be completely dry, with a muddy area in one corner of the pen. Cattle often seek out this area to stand, which would lead the auditor to fail the facility for overall pen condition even though pen conditions may be close to ideal. For these reasons, we utilized the measuring of firm areas in the pen that the cattle can lay down and rest as our quantitative measurement tool for pen conditions.

That quickly summarizes the basis of our program. I would like to now speak on some of the specifics of conducting an audit. Dr. Cook asked me to speak about the actual audit process and common issues that I find. First and foremost, as an auditor, we need to make sure to position ourselves so that we can accurately audit the cattle handling without causing a problem. In a couple of the audits I conducted, I quickly realized my positioning was impeding cattle movement. Many of our facilities have Daniels Double feed alleys which work exceptionally well, however, the cattle can see out. If the auditor is standing in an incorrect place in the cattle's flight zone, you may be the cause of increased electric prod use or flightiness of cattle. In addition, an auditor needs to evaluate a facility when they are in normal conditions for the time of year. This does not mean we need to evaluate a facility two days after a blizzard or major storm event. Basically, an auditor needs to be somewhat flexible in the scheduling of the visit.

As an auditor, you need to develop a relationship with the employees so that they realize you are there to help and educate. It is very important for an operation to conduct some trial audits. These are the times that educational opportunities present themselves both with the employees and the management team. The great majority of our cattle industry employees want to do a good job. As an auditor, we need to work with these employees so that they properly accept our criticism and praise and learn from it. With that said, we also need to be realistic that some employees will not accept change and these circumstances need proper discussion with the upper management.

I would now like to show you some video that illustrates some of the audits I have conducted. The first video in every section is the improper way to handle cattle, followed by a properly trained team and properly designed facility.

(8 minutes of video)

If you would allow me to get on a "soapbox" for a moment, I would like to offer some challenges to all of you. First of all, I do not think we express enough pride in animal agriculture. I would doubt if very many in this room, me included, have ever written or responded to an editorial regarding a negative article or media piece that we have observed. If we do not stand up for our industries, who is going to do it? I have often heard Anne Burkholder

use the following statement: "We need to stand behind our BQA shield, do the right thing and be proud of what we are doing. We also need to be willing to tell our story." Anne was the inaugural winner of the "NCBA BQA Beef Producer of the Year" in 2008. If all of us stand up for what is right and are willing to defend our industry with anyone—whether it is that person beside you on the airplane or your cousin from California—our positive story may begin to be heard. We need to tell them our side of the story and promote that our industry is doing the right things to raise the safest, most wholesome and humanely handled protein source in the world.

With that said, we need to stay a united group and industry. As an example, when the Humane Society of the US released those horrible videos involving dairy cows, there was not a press release from the dairy industry condemning these occurrences. Instead, they explained that this was a beef issue, not a dairy products issue. I am sorry if I offend any of you, but this all started as a dairy industry problem and quickly became a beef issue when these cows were unloaded. It then was on the shoulders of the NCBA to respond to the issue. There were a lot of beef producers ready to ask for the distinction between beef cows and dairy cows in the meat case. Personally, I feel this is feeding directly into the activist groups' plans. They want to divide us as industries and conquer us.

We, as a beef industry, want to continue to work together with you on this problem and find ways to penalize the "bad actors" in both of our industries. I think we have one opportunity to get it right, and get it right the first time, or there will be governmental mandates. This program will be more readily accepted if it stays voluntary and producer driven like the early BQA program. In addition, the consumer acceptance will be better if we are viewed as wanting to do the right thing and be willing to tell our side of the story. Our story is a good one, so let's be proud of it.

To summarize, I hope we can look back five or 10 years from now and find that being proactive about BQA and cattle well-being was the right thing to do, and pat ourselves on the back for advancing our industries to a new level.

References

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