



Working Together for Industry Quality

by Sara Gugelmeyer

You're standing chute side, examining a sick calf. What type of medicine should you give it? Where should you inject it? What type of needle should you use? Now, hopefully you've spoken with your veterinarian, who can help you with these questions. But just as important is to follow Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines.

"BQA is a nationally coordinated, state implemented program that provides systematic information to U.S. beef producers and beef consumers of how common sense husbandry techniques can be coupled with accepted scientific knowledge to raise cattle under optimum management and environmental conditions," according to BQA literature. "These guidelines are designed to make certain all beef consumers can take pride in what they purchase — and can trust and have confidence in the entire beef industry."

The problem

Dee Griffin, veterinarian and professor at University of Nebraska's Great Plains Veterinary Education Center, recalls when BQA came about. "The BQA program grew from a 1980s

concern about residues in food. At that time beef cattle residue numbers were approximately 1.8%, the pork industry was well over 4% and three out of every 10 cans of fruits and vegetables had pesticide residue," Griffin explains. "The real concern was nobody knew we had a problem."

At that time Griffin was working as the veterinarian for Hitch Enterprises, Guymon, Okla. Hitch was the first U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Verified Control Production beef operation. "We figured out that the majority of the problem was dealing with management outliers (cattle which require extra management), and within a matter of very few years, we had the number underneath the government target, which was under 1%."

The BQA program, funded by beef checkoff dollars, conducted research and then educated producers on the problem areas. "Approximately 25% of cattle had an injection site lesion," Griffin says. "In vet school we were told to give shots deep in the muscle, and the rump or back leg was a favorite place."

Once producers were educated on better management practices relating to injections, many of the problems were

eliminated. BQA, however, isn't just about giving shots. "It starts with animal husbandry," Griffin says. "If you take care of the animal in such a way that it never gets sick, then you never have reason to worry about injections. The other issue is to verify what you do; keep records and analyze those records if you have a problem."

Jim Collins, the director of industry relations for the Southeastern Livestock Network and former quality assurance coordinator for the Georgia Cattlemen's Association, stresses that the beauty of the BQA program is that it is producer driven instead of government mandated. "That's why it works so well," he says.

The effectiveness of BQA begins at the state level. Nearly every state has its own BQA program, which is voluntary, locally led and administered through organizations such as state beef councils, land grant Universities and state cattle associations. BQA links beef producers with livestock specialists, veterinarians, nutritionists, marketers and food purveyors interested in maintaining and improving the quality of cattle and the beef they produce.

Producer integrity

But more than anything, BQA relies on the integrity of each beef producer in the production chain, whether it's in the pasture or feedyard. One such producer is Scott MacNair, co-owner of Cottonwood Corral Inc., Jetmore, Kan. Scott and his brother Michael have a large farming operation and a 2,000 head custom starter feedyard. They straighten out about 5,000 head of cattle a year for customers to feed out or graze on wheat pasture or grass.

The starter yard can be the ultimate test of health protocols because it's a place where cattle are already stressed. A majority of the cattle come in weighing 400-500 lb., and it's the MacNairs' job to help the cattle and the owners avoid health problems at the next phase, whether that be the feedyard, wheat field or grass pasture.

Scott says, "We work really close with our vet on all health protocols. We're all certainly here to get the best product on the market for the consumer. We've been doing this for a lot of years, and there's been a lot of things change."

The most major change for them is injection protocols. Scott says they now avoid products that must be injected intramuscularly and always give injections in the neck.

Griffin explains the reasoning behind subcutaneous shots is to avoid damage to the muscle, which will ultimately become meat. Research at Colorado State University proved that even an injection of saline in the animal's muscle results in damage that will last more than a year. Also, Griffin says, tenderness is compromised up to four inches around the injection site. All of this adds up to a lot of trim and wasted meat.

Scott says it's obvious when cattle have received the best animal care prior to arriving in his pens. Last fall he started 1,600 source- and age-verified cattle to be fed at Ford County Feed Yard, some of which will qualify for the Certified Hereford Beef (CHB) program. With those, he said his job is more processing than anything because the cattle have been preweaned and already received vaccinations. "There's not really any health issues with them." Death loss on those cattle has been .125%.

Some of Cottonwood Corral's customers prefer to buy cattle that are discounted to try to add value. Oftentimes these cattle are "cutting bulls" the MacNairs prepare for summer grass. In contrast, these cattle are weaned on the truck and have never been vaccinated, dehorned or castrated. Even with Scott's innovative animal health program and

diligent care, death loss on these cattle is usually around 1%. With all the extra stress and treatment, albeit necessary at this point, it is cattle like these that are most likely to end up a “management outlier” and jeopardize the safety of the food system.

Starts with education

That’s why it’s important for beef producers to be educated in all phases of the beef production chain. The BQA program breaks down into six categories of guidelines, which can be applied by any producer, cow-calf operator, stocker and feeder.

Griffin explains each simply:

1. Care for your animals,
2. Vaccinate, 3. Feed them right,
4. Follow the rules on feed additives and medications, 5. Use health products wisely, and 6. Keep good records (because you can’t manage what you don’t measure).

As another example of caring for animals, Scott uses a sprinkler system to keep the dust down in his pens. “We have hydrants in the pens so if any of these cattle come in bawling, we get the sprinklers out there first so they’re not bawling in the dust.”

Another point that is often undervalued is records. In recent audits, samples were taken both randomly and from target groups. Griffin explains, “Over 80% of those residues would have been prevented if somebody would have checked the records. How simple is that?”

The other 20% are problems with cattle retaining residue of a drug longer than the label suggests because of some kind of organ problem. “These are management outliers where there was some organ defect that didn’t allow the drug to clear the system properly,” Griffin says. “These outliers need to be evaluated by management and veterinarians more closely.”

He suggests going so far as to test these cattle, which are at risk of having

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residue, prior to their being shipped to the plant to be completely sure.

Although the industry has made huge gains in the BQA area in the past 30 years, even more can be done. Collins says, “We need the same effort from the cow-calf operator to the end user. Don’t take for granted that everyone understands these guidelines; make sure. Work together to have a plan that can be measured and evaluated and continue to make progress. Have a plan figured out to avoid problems that might result.”

At Cottonwood Corral Inc., Scott, Michael and their staff are well educated. During busy times, they process 100 head a day, and have for decades. Still, they have diagrams and checklists posted in the processing barn to remind everyone of the protocols.

Scott says, “It’s important to me because I want to get the job done right, and those types of little problems can cause bigger problems later on. It’s amazing how just taking care of the little things pays off for you in the end.”

Take responsibility

Collins encourages producers to have a common sense approach but

to remember that each person should be responsible for his or her area of expertise. On a cow-calf operation, oftentimes it’s the same person each year at branding that gives shots and another person that castrates. Then it’s somebody else completely that cares for the cattle the rest of the year. It’s critical that each person understands the BQA guidelines relating to his responsibilities.

Looking ahead to places where beef producers are still falling short in terms of beef quality audits is the area related to bruising. Griffin says, “Bruising costs us almost 100 million a year and we’re only marketing 5 million head of cattle.”

For example, he says, “Some old cow goes into market and she is limping; she’s easier to bruise. If she bruises in her flank, because of the muscle structure, it can cause 20 to 30 lb. of trim.”

Much of bruising can be avoided by using proper cattle handling techniques, Griffin says. Low-stress cattle handling education is critical, not only for cattlemen but also for auction market personnel and truckers who transport cattle.

BQA, at its foundation, is simply an educational program designed by producers for producers to ensure the beef industry is producing the best product possible. Collins emphasizes, “Caring for animals is the backbone behind this process. All different sectors contribute to our beef supply, and in order to remain successful, all must take it seriously.” **HW**

Editor’s Note: Information about the BQA program can be found at www.bqa.org. The resources page is rife with educational tools and information for all types of producers. Animalcaretraining.org hosts online training modules for beef and other producers to test or improve their knowledge.



The MacNairs use specially designed receiving pens for the first weeks after the cattle arrive. The pie-shaped pens make it easier to pull sick calves.