



Alabama Beef Quality Assurance: **Getting Started**

ANR-1277

The BQA program is a cooperative effort of beef producers, veterinarians, Alabama Cooperative Extension System staff and other professionals representing Extension, the Alabama Veterinary Medical Association, the Alabama Cattlemen's Association, and the Alabama Farmers Federation Beef Group. It is not a herd health program, but a comprehensive effort to ensure a safe, wholesome supply of beef.

Cattle managed under BQA guidelines will be less likely to contain a violative residue, contain injection site tissue damage, or foreign metal, such as a broken needle. They are cared for using science-based procedures to ensure proper care and well-being. Participants certified under Alabama BQA will follow Food and Drug Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Environmental Protection Agency guidelines for products, will use common sense, reasonable management skills, and accepted scientific knowledge to avoid product defects at the consumer level and meet current animal care standards.

Assuring the consumer that all cattle shipped from a beef production unit are healthy, wholesome, and safe and their management has met FDA, USDA, and EPA standards is the primary goal of the BQA program.

Objectives

The following are the objectives of the Alabama BQA program:

- Set realistic production standards in your operation.
- Establish systems for data retention and record keeping. Record-keeping systems, which meet FDA, USDA, and EPA guidelines, will allow validation of management activities and fulfill the program goal.
- Provide training and education for participants to realize the benefits of the BQA program.

- Provide technical assistance through AL-BQA-certified Extension staff.

Understanding Quality Challenges

The importance of beef quality assurance can be seen when analyzing the top eight quality challenges within the beef industry. These quality challenges include injection site blemishes, rib brands, excessive external fat, excessive seam fat, dark cutters, inconsistent size of meat cuts, inconsistent cuts, and non-uniform cattle.

Injection site blemishes cost the beef industry \$188 million annually and cost producers approximately \$7.05 per head, according to the 1995 National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA). In 1991, in fed cattle, 21.6 percent of all top butts evaluated in the injection site audit had injection site blemishes, with a majority of those being fluid filled. In 1999, also in fed cattle, this defect was down to 3.2 percent, with so few being fluid filled they are not reported. While this is a major improvement in 6 years in fed cattle, the results in nonfed cattle are not quite as pleasing. During the first nonfed audit in 1994, the percent of injection site blemishes in nonfed cattle was found to be 28.9 percent (7.5 percent fluid filled), but, in the November 1997 audit, this increased to 40.9 percent (3.9 percent fluid filled).

Brands and other hide defects, such as parasite damage, cost the beef industry greater 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. According to the 1995 NBQA, this is equivalent to \$24.30 per head.

The 1995 NBQA provides management tactics for overcoming beef quality's shortcomings. These include eliminating side and multiple brands, removing horns, improving parasite control, improving red meat yield, improving handling and transport techniques, eliminating intramuscular injections, measuring traits that

affect value, and eliminating genetic and management systems that erode tenderness, juiciness, and flavor.

Correct management procedures may reduce, if not eliminate, the occurrence of these quality challenges. Correct administration of animal health products, moving brands to the shoulder or hip areas, marketing cattle at an optimum time, reducing the amount of stress placed on cattle, and sorting cattle into marketing groups are just some of the management procedures that can assist in the elimination of quality defects and thus increase market value.

Consumers have always wanted safe food. In 1980, concerns about additional government regulation and loss of modern production tools caused cattle producers to investigate ways to ensure that their production practices were safe and would pass the scrutiny of the consumer.

History of BQA

In 1982, the United States Department of Agriculture-Food Safety Inspection Service (USDA-FSIS) began working with the beef industry in the United States to develop the Pre-harvest Beef Safety Production Program. Not wanting any additional governmental regulatory programs, the beef industry adopted the term Beef Quality Assurance. Involvement with Beef Quality Assurance provides cattle producers with an important key for avoiding additional government regulation. USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service has commended the National BQA Program as there are currently 47 states and more than 90 percent of U.S. beef production involved with the voluntary program. Regulating the industry has proven successful and will continue to allow the industry flexibility needed to produce safe and wholesome food in an economical manner.

Between 1982 and 1985, USDA-FSIS and three feedlots evaluated production practices to assess residue risks. In 1985, after careful analysis and adjustment of production practices, these three feedlots were certified by the USDA-FSIS as Verified Production Control feedlots. What was learned during those 3 years now serves as the backbone for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) BQA program. Success of the effort is clear: violative chemical residues have almost disappeared in fed beef cattle and injection site lesions have been reduced by more than 67 percent.

While the BQA program was developing, Pillsbury was implementing a quality control program that used many of the same principles. Their program, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point Program (HACCP) gained USDA acceptance and is presently the dominant outline for quality assurance programs in processed foods. Per USDA regulation, all packing plants have developed or will be developing HACCP programs.

The concepts of the HACCP program are the same as those of BQA. It is a process of determining what could go wrong, planning to avoid it, and documenting what you have done, with the additional step of validation. In the cattle business, everything has been documented and validated for years because it is part of good business. USDA's HACCP program includes food-borne bacterial pathogen control, a problem that currently is not controllable at the farm or ranch level. Therefore, HACCP concepts are applied in the Quality Assurance Critical Management Points~ (QACMP) system at the production level within the BQA management. While this system does not focus on pre-harvest bacterial food borne pathogen control, the system will provide experience with HACCP concepts. When pre-harvest bacterial pathogen control measures become available and/or federal regulations mandate control measures, the QACMP~ system will provide a valuable experience to aid operations and/or provide valuable information and feedback needed to work with federal regulators.

AL-BQA Certification

The Alabama BQA program is not complicated. For the most part, it is a matter of determining what can go wrong and thinking of solutions to prevent the problem from occurring or reoccurring. The AL-BQA certification materials provide an opportunity to proceed through the problem-solving process. Not everyone will identify the same problems. The objective for you is to find the best solution to avoid quality problems in your operation with the assistance of those important to the success of your operation. The people you work with and depend on become your BQA team. The real power is in the combined thoughts, experiences, and judgment of everyone trying to produce the best quality product possible. Most valuable players come from all parts of the production operation. There are no most valuable players.

This manual will present the AL-BQA program. All facets are linked to and support the AL-BQA guidelines. Take each AL-BQA guideline and determine how it fits in your operation to determine if adjustments need to be made. You and your BQA team need solutions that are practical and meet the needs of the AL-BQA program, making operations run better.

Becoming AL-BQA Certified

Certification can be accomplished by attending an AL-BQA training program. After completion of the training session, a BQA test is required. After passing the BQA test, the AL-BQA Training Program Checklist and Personal Contract must be signed. The AL-BQA trainers will then issue a BQA certification number. Certification is valid for up to 3 years. Recertification is required on the third January 1 after certification.

Advantages of Certification

The cattle business is tough enough without doing things that don't make economic sense. Beef Quality Assurance is economically logical and everything in the BQA program is part of good business management. The information from the records maintained will help avoid costly production mistakes and produce better business decisions. Implementing BQA is an excellent decision that can help identify and avoid certain production defects.

Above all, involvement in BQA is a statement that reminds everyone from cowboy to consumer that everything possible is being done to produce a defect-free product. Involvement with Beef Quality Assurance is one way to show the media and consumers that cattle producers raise beef responsibly. Consumers lose confidence in beef when they find a defect that escaped a cattle producer's facility and entered the food chain. Loss of consumer confidence in beef causes significant changes in their eating habits and affects the future of the industry.

All meat industries face similar problems and concerns. If there were a time to get involved, it was yesterday. If you are not a member of the Alabama Cattlemen's Association and Alabama BCIA, join. If you are not a member of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, join. The events in the near future could affect production within your operation for all generations to come. Will Rogers said, "The world is run by those that show up." It is time for all of us to show up.

Summary

Identify one area at a time, then develop and implement a plan for assuring quality in that area of production. The experience gained will make it easier to develop quality assurance in other areas of the operation.

Cattle will be free of violative residues and product-related defects if products are administered according to USDA, FDA, and EPA standards, and producers use BQA record-keeping procedures without exception.

There are many safeguards built into beef production that help the beef industry avoid quality defects: handling of animals on an individual basis, the length of time required to produce a finished product, and the quality and safety built into modern health-related technologies of beef production.

Every producer and employee must be trained to know, understand, and identify areas where possible contamination with violative residues or quality defects may occur. Anyone who supplies services, commodities, or products to a producer must understand the beef operation's quality assurance objectives.

Cattle producers must be able to document all the steps of production. Good production records allow for documentation, analysis, and improved financial decisions.

There are points in production that must be monitored to ensure no residue violations or carcass defects occur. The critical points include, but are not limited to incoming cattle, products and commodities, cattle handling, and evaluation of outgoing cattle.



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