

Quality Assurance Educational Programs For Animal Agriculture

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series.

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Food Safety
Wholesomeness
And Quality

Antibiotic residues, injection-site blemishes, microbial contamination, animal welfare, animal handling, livestock transportation, trim loss, industry credibility are all important concerns for animal agriculture. How effectively we address them will determine the profitability of our animal industries.

Let's review a progressive new program designed to deal with these concerns.

"Quality Assurance" (QA) is being put into effect in every segment of animal agriculture, including beef, dairy-beef, milk, pork, poultry, veal, even lamb and aquaculture. Of course, producers and processors always have been quality-conscious. And they always have practiced many of the steps included in modern, organized QA programs.

But now QA must put it all together in a total, step-by-step program. QA Educational Programs (QAEPs) were instituted because of the occurrence of chemical residues (usually antibiotics) in animal products.

However, other losses also have been addressed. For instance, in the beef QAEP, one major effort is to reduce the frequency and degree of injection-site blemishes. Although not a public health concern, they detract from the appearance of meat. These imperfections usually are not noticed until the carcass is cut into retail cuts. The trimming required to remove them results not only in a loss of meat, but also in additional labor cost for packers, processors, and retailers.

In the milk, pork, and veal industries the primary impetus for QA has been to further reduce the already low incidence of antibiotic residues. The special-fed veal industry is a good example of the effectiveness of such QAEPs. Frequency of antibiotic residues has dropped from 3.34 percent in 1988 (when the veal QAEP began) to 0.13 percent in 1992.

No one program can bring about all the changes in a production system needed to assure profitable production of safe, wholesome foods or maintain high consumer confidence in products of animal origin. However, the short history of QAEPs indicates they are nonetheless effective.

What makes a QAEP effective? Involvement of producers and processors and their desire to guarantee the future of their respective industries

Status Of Our Food Supply

Probably anyone who has addressed consumer groups or talked to reporters has commented, "The U.S. food supply is the safest in the world." Although this is true — particularly when compared to food produced in developing countries — it is not an effective statement for our consumers. This nation is one of the most technologically advanced in the world, and we have had strong food inspection programs for decades.

With all our knowledge and technology, we should have a safe food supply as well as a progressive attitude toward even further improvements. But finding antibiotic residues in milk or cull dairy or beef cows or bob calves indicates we still have work to do, as does finding E. coli in hamburger.

Quality Loss Audits

The National Cattlemen's Association recently completed a comprehensive study in which the value of all carcass losses (hide damage, excess fatness, blemishes, bruises, undesirable meat color, etc.) were determined. Average losses for each steer and heifer produced in the nation's feedlots totalled \$280 per head.

Packers and processors typically add value to the live animal they purchase from the producer. If they have an average loss of \$20, \$50, \$100, or \$280 per carcass, then that amount of loss has to be accounted for. It usually is averaged over all cattle feeders and all carcasses. Everyone along the producing-marketing chain shares in this loss.

Direct Costs Of Defects To Producers

Dairy farmers long have been aware of the direct cost of a mistake which contaminates a tankful of milk. The value of that milk is lost. But producers usually don't have accountability for cull beef cows, dairy cows, bob calves, or even finished steers, lambs, or hogs.

There's a new trend, though. In many larger packing plants nowadays, cattle feeders are being "billed back" for bruises, injection-site blemishes, condem-

nations, and other carcass defects that cause extra labor and carcass trimming. This trend will continue, and during the next five years there will be increasing producer accountability for such losses in every food animal species, regardless of whether marketing is direct or through auctions or buying stations.

Similarities Among QAEPs

Although each commodity organization's QAEP has different specific areas of concern or emphasis, there are several simi-

larities across all programs:

- Built on strengthening the veterinarian-client-patient relationship, but including team members from other disciplines — certified animal scientists, nutritionists, meat scientists, animal care specialists, animal handling experts, etc.

- Involving manufacturers/distributors of animal health products, encouraging them to market products less destructive to muscle tissue and administrable subcutaneously.

- Improving communications among producers, veterinarians,

meat/milk inspectors, and processors, so all segments know about specific problems that need improvement.

- Improving handling, transportation, and general animal care so as to result in fewer bruises and less animal excitement, which can decrease quality — and thus value — of the resulting meat product.

- Encouraging producers, in consultation with their veterinarians, to initiate early diagnosis and treatment of health problems, and to cull animals as soon as it is clear the animal will not recover.

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