



# Cattle Producer's Handbook

Quality Assurance Section

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## National Beef Quality Audits: A Review of the Past, A Look into the Future

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Over the past several years the National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA) has given direction to cow-calf operations all over the U.S. The audit has given excellent information to producers, packers, and consumers alike. The audit has changed a small amount in the way it collects its data from the consumer. Improvements in data collection for the NBQA have led to more precision in the recommendations made each time an audit has been conducted.

The audits are funded through the Beef Check Off, which is administered by the Cattlemen's Beef Board. The audits are based on a set of three core principles:

- **Core 1 (Face-to-face interviews):** NBQA conducted interviews over 11 months with feeders, packers, retailers, foodservice operators, and allied industry/government employees who defined and ranked seven quality categories—(1) how and where cattle were raised; (2) lean, fat, and bone; (3) weight and size; (4) cattle genetics; (5) visual characteristics; (6) food safety; and (7) eating satisfaction.
- **Core 2 (Research teams):** Teams surveyed 18,000 carcasses on the harvest floor from eight beef processing plants, determined quality and yield grade from 9,000 chilled carcasses from 28 beef processing plants, and compared instrument-grading results with USDA grader information on 2.4 million carcasses from 17 plants.
- **Core 3 (Surveys):** Surveys were conducted to determine the adoption of Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) practices and management principles. The surveys were conducted using both online and written questions resulting in 3,755 responses from seedstock operators, commercial cow-calf producers, backgrounders, stocker/yearling operators, feedlot producers, and dairymen.

### Review of the Past

Since its inception, consumers have changed their opinions regarding what is important relative to beef quality. When discussing consumers, we are not strictly meaning the retail consumer but all of the market chain. In the 2000 audit, the consumer focused on overall uniformity, carcass weights, tenderness, marbling, reduced quality due to implants, and external fat. According to the 2005 audit, consumers identified new concerns. Those concerns differing from the 2000 audit were traceability, instrument grading, market signals, and segmentation.

As the National Cattlemen's Beef Association BQA program worked on these concerns during the past 6 years and made great progress in educating producers, the needs and concerns of consumers changed once again to what we have today in the 2011 audit. The most recent challenges identified by consumers are food safety; eating satisfaction; how and where the cattle were raised; lean, fat, and bone; weight and size; and cattle genetics.

The 2011 audit clearly defined and ranked the current challenges and emphasized consumer concerns and the necessity for feedback signals up and down the beef marketing chain. The top three challenges were (1) food safety, (2) eating satisfaction, and (3) how and where the cattle were raised. When asked what the top weaknesses of the beef industry were, the participants listed industry fragmentation and not effectively telling the beef story. Food safety issues and variability in the product were also identified as barriers.

What does nonconformance (not meeting the ideal targets for quality) cost the beef industry? The audit determined that more than \$40 per head were not real-

ized, primarily because of not meeting targets for both quality and yield grades. However, this represents approximately \$12 per head better return than the 2005 audit reported.

During the consumers' strategy workshop, participants identified inadequate recordkeeping as one of the main focus areas. The participants in the workshop encouraged producers to use NBQA and proper recordkeeping. Recordkeeping must become more consistent through the entire supply chain. Instead of promoting "guidelines," it is time to establish production standards for the producer.

Recordkeeping, as identified in the 2011 NBQA, is an essential part of any producer program. It is critically important to be able to identify what we have done during the year to our cows and calves. Keeping good records also improves consumer confidence and can aid in helping producers make sound business decisions. In relation to liability, good records help protect those who are making decisions in real time by knowing who has been trained to perform certain tasks, what products to use and what have been used, adhere to proper withdrawal times, dispose of products in a timely fashion and manner, and general inventory control of vaccines and medications.

There are several ways to keep good records and most are adequate in relation to NBQA. Most impor-

tant is that data are recorded and tracked and can be gathered into one place. Some of these methods of information collection include writing data on a calendar, using the National Cattlemen's Beef Association IRM (Integrated Resource Management) Red Book, or some other similar record book available through associations, or even using smart phone technology for electronic recordkeeping. It is important to keep in mind that all records that have been collected on animals should be kept for a minimum of 3 years before destroying the records.

## A Look into the Future

When producers are evaluating the holistic approach to recordkeeping, it is important to recognize that records influence many of the decisions made on a day-to-day basis to include helping plan for the coming year. Recordkeeping strategies should include livestock treatments, pesticide treatments (such as deworming, etc.), herbicide treatments on pastures or rangeland, and feed purchases.

If consumer confidence is increased, producers can realize the \$40 lost through not meeting targets in quality and yield. This will increase profit margins and consumers will receive what they want most—better product, greater transparency, less fragmentation, and the producers telling the entire story.



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