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Kelly Namminga
South Dakota State University

William Epperson
South Dakota State University

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Quality Assurance (QA) Programs for Livestock Production

*by Kelly Namminga SDSU food science graduate assistant,
with review by William Epperson, DVM, SDSU veterinarian extension specialist*

A major goal of the livestock industry is to produce a high-quality product for consumers. All livestock groups (beef, dairy, pork and sheep) have developed quality assurance (QA) programs to help producers meet consumer expectations. The focus of QA programs in the past has been to address issues such as drug residue avoidance and/or elimination and to reduce quality defects in the meat produced.

More recent consumer concerns about microbial contamination with organisms such as *E. coli O157:H7*, *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*, have prompted QA programs to begin to address pathogen reduction strategies on the farm. By participating in these programs, livestock producers are sharing the responsibility for safe, quality food production.

Beef Quality Assurance (BQA)

In 1986, what was then the National Cattlemen's Association (now the National Cattlemen's Beef Association or NCBA) established the Beef Safety Assurance Task Force. The Task force interviewed people who represented and influenced various aspects of the beef industry, from beef producers to consumer groups. The interviews focused on gathering information to make recommendations to the industry about the safety and wholesomeness of beef and beef products.

The Task Force emphasized three strategies for the beef industry:

- Adopt a pro-active approach to food safety.
- Develop a voluntary, producer-oriented safety assurance education program.
- Coordinate the safety assurance program at the national level, but allow each state to develop and implement a program.

The Texas Cattle Feeders Association was the first to develop a producer program, followed by the Nebraska Cattlemen and the Colorado Cattle Feeders. Today, states that have producer Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) programs represent 90% of the fed cattle marketed.

Each year, the BQA state coordinators' seminar provides an opportunity for states to exchange program information and ideas, learn about new research, and help set direction for the program. The national organization also develops educational materials that can be used in state programs. In addition, the BQA Task Force has worked with the dairy industry on a quality assurance program that includes BQA recommendations related to dairy beef animals.

With increased consumer awareness and concern over food safety and emerging pathogens, BQA programs have expanded to incorporate Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles. This enables producers to apply principles that help prevent or reduce microbial contamination on the farm, making it easier to reduce or eliminate contamination during processing and preparation for consumer use.

Dairy Quality Assurance (DQA)

The Milk & Dairy Beef Quality Assurance Program is designed to reduce the incidence of antibiotic and pesticide residues, not only in milk, but in dairy beef as well. This program focuses on educating producers about proper animal and facility management and drug use techniques.

The DQA program is implemented through the cooperation of producers and their veterinarians following a Producer's Manual that is based on HACCP principles.

The manual evaluates each dairy operation's management practices related to the use of drugs in the dairy herd. Though the program is voluntary, it is referenced in the Grade "A" Pasteurized Milk Ordinance (PMO) and in the USDA Manufacturing Grade Milk Standards.

Endorsements for this program have come from veterinary organizations, state Extension dairy and veterinarian specialists, producer organizations, the Food and Drug Administration, the Food Safety Inspection Service, and the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service.

Pork Quality Assurance (PQA)

Pork Quality Assurance is a multi-level producer program that has been designed to enhance the quality of pork and pork products sold to consumers. In 1989, the National Pork Producers Council introduced PQA as a voluntary, three-level management education program. The program emphasizes good management practices when handling and using animal health products.

The PQA program is for all pork producers, regardless of the size of their operation. These are the goals of participation for the individual producer:

- To improve management practices.
- To avoid violative drug residues.
- To decrease production costs.
- To increase awareness of food safety concerns.

Sheep Quality Assurance

Sheep provide several products for consumer use including meat, wool, milk, and lanolin. In 1992 and 1993, the American Sheep Industry Association (ASI), in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, conducted quality audits to trace each product from production to the consumer. These audits evaluated management practices that have an effect on the quality of sheep products.

Since 1991, the ASI has been working to develop an industry-wide quality assurance program designed to educate producers about good management practices and to incorporate HACCP principles into production plans.

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SDSU CES co-directors are Carol Pitts, M.S., R.D./L.N., Extension food and nutrition specialist;
William Epperson, DVM, Extension veterinarian; and
Mike Adelaine, Ph.D., Extension microcomputer applications specialist,
assisted by Joan Hegerfeld, Extension food safety assistant.*

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