

The National Beef Quality Audit — 2011

Phase III: An evaluation of quality enhancement by the seedstock, cow/calf and stocker segments through a nation-wide survey



Adoption and effectiveness of the checkoff-funded Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program has been evaluated primarily by monitoring quality characteristics at harvest through the National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA) at processing plants through injection site blemish audits, and on cattle operations by local/regional surveys. While these data sources provide a snapshot of defects that occur in the cattle industry, none were designed to directly measure the level of adoption of production practices consistent with BQA guidelines at the seedstock, cow/calf, or stocker sectors. To address this knowledge gap, a nationwide survey was funded by the beef checkoff to specifically assess BQA-related production and management practices. The resulting data serve as a benchmark and provide a foundation for future educational initiatives.

Cattle producers across the United States answered a 43-question survey either online or at industry events and educational meetings during Phase III of the NBQA-2011. Surveys were completed by 3,755 cattle producers from 45 states, of which 74.8% indicated they were primarily a commercial cow/calf operator.

When asked what the term 'quality' meant to them in relation to the beef industry, respondents overwhelmingly emphasized it was the "production of safe, wholesome, and healthy animals and beef products." Further, respondents indicated they focused on preventative health care via a vaccination program (89.1%) and use of good stockmanship and animal handling skills (92.9%) to intentionally influence the quality of beef products (Table 1). This emphasis by producers on health management and animal handling may provide an opportunity for the industry to respond to beef supply chain demand for more documented information on "how and where cattle are raised" (a key finding of Phase I of the NBQA-2011).

Fourth in a series of NBQA fact sheets.

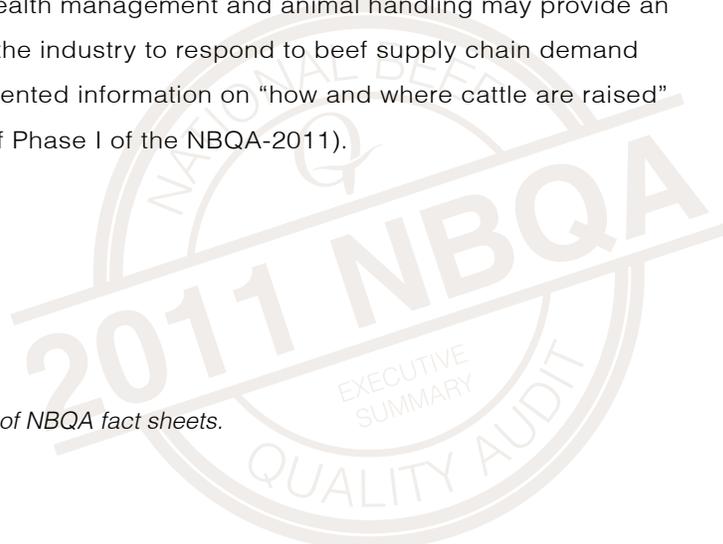




Table 1. Ranking of Quality Categories by Sector

Ways in which survey respondents intentionally influence "quality" overall and by sector

Method	Overall	Sector (%)					
		Seedstock	Commercial cow/calf	Backgrounder/preconditioner	Stocker/yearling	Feedlot	Dairy
Animal handling ¹	92.9	94.7	92.7	95.9	97.0	93.0	81.3
Preventative health ²	89.1	94.2	88.4	93.8	92.2	85.9	81.3
Nutrition program ³	85.3	92.1	83.9	90.7	87.9	90.3	72.7
Best management practices ⁴	84.0	90.2	82.3	92.8	86.7	85.9	74.1
Genetics ⁵	78.7	98.9	82.9	63.9	48.8	48.7	47.5
Documentation ⁶	66.2	79.3	64.9	68.0	59.5	64.4	51.1
BQA protocols ⁷	55.7	63.4	53.0	65.0	55.8	68.1	28.1
Market tactics ⁸	50.1	61.3	47.8	61.9	55.2	58.1	19.4
Do not influence ⁹	3.6	1.3	3.7	3.1	4.9	2.4	11.5
Other	2.2	4.3	1.7	2.5	1.7	3.0	0.0

¹ Use of good stockmanship and animal handling skills. ⁴ Implementation of best management practices, including how vaccinations and antibiotics are administered. ⁷ Implementation of my state's Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) protocols.
² Preventative health care (i.e. vaccination program). ⁵ Genetic selection and breeding systems. ⁸ Matching management strategies to specific market targets.
³ Implementation of a sound nutritional program. ⁶ Documentation of management practices (possibly including age, source, etc.). ⁹ I do not intentionally influence quality.

Source: NBQA 2011

Low-stress cattle handling is a priority among cattle producers. More than 98% of respondents did not use an electric prod as their primary driving tool when working cattle, and 50% didn't use one at all. Among those who used an electric prod, 86% used it on less than 10% of their cattle.

Low-stress animal handling helps reduce end-product quality defects and losses due to bruising, dark cutting beef, and stress-induced poor animal health performance.

Cattle producers work hard to ensure beef safety. More than 95% of respondents said they always or usually verify that proper withdrawal times for animal health products are followed. However, 2.0% of respondents acknowledged they never verify adherence to proper withdrawal times. This is unacceptable and must be addressed as an essential priority within the industry. Overall, 78.3% of respondents use individual ear tags to keep track of cattle receiving animal health products. It is imperative for food safety and consumer confidence that producers ensure cattle which do not meet the required drug withdrawal period never enter the marketplace.

A core BQA principle involves establishment of a working relationship with a veterinarian by cattle producers. Nine out of ten respondents said they have such a partnership, often referred to as the Veterinary-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR). However, an issue of concern was that only 31.3% of respondents said they had a written protocol for health treatments. Improper use of animal health products can result in end-product quality defects and safety issues, including violative drug residues and inferior carcass traits due to poor animal health status and performance. More widespread use of written protocols and records for cattle health management is warranted, particularly as consumers seek more information about how and where cattle are raised.

Elimination of injection-site lesions has long been a cornerstone objective of the BQA program. Results of the present survey found that 84.2% of respondents said their preferred route of administration was subcutaneously (SubQ or under-the-skin), which is the recommended approach. Placing injections in front of the shoulder in the neck

area is another key BQA principle, and 87% of respondents said this was their preferred injection location (although dairy producers lag behind at only 46%). Such high rates of compliance to BQA guidelines confirm BQA education efforts, particularly since injections were overwhelmingly given intramuscularly and in the rump when the BQA program began in the 1980s. Moving the preferred injection site location to the neck region and changing the route of administration to SubQ has greatly improved end-product quality by avoiding significant damage to high-value cuts in the round and sirloin regions of the carcass. In addition, this has led to decreased trim losses due to injection site lesions and abscesses within the muscle.

An impressive 85.0% of commercial cow/calf operators who answered the survey have heard of BQA, and 69.3% of those have attended a BQA training or completed online training. Among those who completed the BQA training, 78.1% said a certificate of completion was provided. Based on the total number of respondents, approximately 42.6% indicate they are BQA certified. Of commercial cow/calf producers who attended a BQA-type training, 98.5% responded that they always or usually follow best management practices consistent with BQA principles (Table 2).

When asked why they choose to follow BQA practices, 87% said “it is the right thing to do” and 83.9% indicated they are “committed to continuous improvement.” (Table 3). Results suggested that a financial reward tied to BQA Certification was not a primary reason for producers to follow BQA principles. While the high level of compliance to BQA principles among the cattle production sectors

Table 2. Among respondents who have attended a BQA training, percent who feel they always, usually, sometimes, or never follow best management practices consistent with BQA, by operation type

Frequency	Sector (%)						
	Overall	Seedstock	Commercial/ cow/calf	Backgrounder/ preconditioner	Stocker/ yearling	Feedlot	Dairy
Always	66.5	68.1	66.1	63.9	56.0	72.7	44.1
Usually	31.9	31.1	32.4	32.8	42.0	26.5	47.1
Sometimes	1.6	0.9	1.5	3.3	2.0	0.5	8.8
Never	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0

Table 3. Among respondents who have attended a BQA training, reason(s) they choose to follow best management practices consistent with BQA

Reason	All sectors combined (%)*
It's the right thing to do	87.0
I receive a premium when I sell	35.4
It's required by the buyer of the cattle	12.0
I'm committed to continuous improvement	83.9
Other	4.3

*Respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer.

was positive, an identified need, however, is to increase conformity to BQA practices among dairymen who vaccinated primarily in the hip rather than in the neck.

In summary, respondents who had attended a BQA training, compared to those who had not, were more likely to use individual animal identification, keep written records, have a working relationship with a veterinarian, give injections subcutaneously in the neck area, and train their workers on BQA principles.

Producers must consciously utilize appropriate animal handling, care, and health management practices to meet consumer demands. Cattle producers recognize that using BQA-oriented management practices is the right thing to do, and BQA is a tool to help improve the quality of their cattle. Since inception, the BQA program has improved production practices among cattlemen. Continued development of on-ranch/on-farm BQA educational tools will further enhance the adoption of BQA principles at the grassroots level. Sustained educational efforts should remain a high priority within the industry to enhance the adoption rate of BQA principles.



For more information, contact:

**National Cattlemen's
Beef Association**

**Contractor to the
Beef Checkoff Program**

9110 East Nichols Avenue
Centennial, CO 80112
303.694.0305

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