

Implementing a Quality Assurance Program

Julia Keenlside

Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, #204, 7000 - 113 St., Edmonton, AB T6H 5T6
Email: julia.keenlside@agric.gov.ab.ca

▪ Introduction

Documentation that certain standards of production are followed is becoming increasingly important in selling livestock products both domestically and internationally.

The term "Quality Assurance" is now used in several countries to describe programs that set standards for livestock production. Under these programs, producers must follow certain practices in raising stock, keep appropriate records to show their compliance, and have a farm visit or inspection up to several times a year. The standards can cover practices that influence meat or carcass quality, food safety, environmental friendliness or animal welfare - things that cannot always be assessed by inspecting the animal or the meat product.

Some Quality Assurance programs are promoted as HACCP or HACCP-based. HACCP (pronounced "hassip") stands for Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points and describes a systematic approach to food safety first used in the US in the 1960's. When Pillsbury was contracted to produce food for NASA's space program, they found they could not guarantee product safety by relying on the testing of every package. So they adopted a systemic approach to identification and elimination of potential hazards during production, to *prevent* hazards. If certain processes were followed, then safety of the product could be assured.

Similarly, testing every hog for all possible drug residues is not feasible. So a better system to ensure the safety of each pork chop had to be developed. Most Quality Assurance programs follow the same philosophy.

- **What is the Canadian Quality Assurance Program (CQA)?**

Canadian Quality Assurance (CQA) program grew out of an industry desire to have consistent pork production standards across Canada. It became apparent that some provinces and processors were developing their own programs, and inconsistent standards for food safety could send a confusing message to the industry and consumers. It also grew out of the concern that if we waited until the public or the government set standards, they might be unreasonable or impractical to follow on farm.

Under the organization of the Canadian Pork Council, representatives from eight pork producing provinces got together and designed a set of national standards and a book for producers to use. This group included producers, swine specialists, veterinarians and a HACCP expert. The group quickly agreed that food safety was the most important issue and that the program would only address potential food safety hazards. Environment, welfare, production efficiency, or carcass quality would not be included.

The HACCP method was used to determine all the possible food safety hazards that could arise on a pork production unit. Then Good Production Practices were suggested that reduce these hazards on-farm. Care was taken to ensure practices were both effective and practical to implement in today's production systems.

The program is a series of standard good production practices that improve food safety. Some of these practices will be standard across all farms (e.g. always follow recommended withdrawal times), while others need to be written for each specific farm (e.g. how to handle the shipping of sows that have been receiving medicated feed), depending on its set-up. Implementing the program means learning these practices, understanding why they are important and keeping records that show these practices are followed. Note that any Quality Assurance program does not strictly guarantee the quality or safety of the item produced under the system - it only guarantees that specified good production practices are followed.

- **What are the Food Safety Hazards addressed by the program?**

The food safety hazards identified under the HACCP model are: drug residues, broken needles, bacterial contamination (eg Salmonella). Research is beginning to show that certain on-farm practices may reduce the rate of infection with Salmonella. While drug residues have been the main issue in the

past, the development of antibiotic resistant bacteria is emerging as a bigger issue. This requires that drug use practices be examined to ensure they are responsible. Which means that a) drug use is recorded, so its success or failure can be assessed, and b) drug use is discussed with a veterinarian and is not used in place of good management.

Some specific areas that are discussed include:

- ▶ selling underweight, "roasting" or "BBQ" pigs: are they on medicated feed or water or had recent treatment?
- ▶ shipping sows: are they on medicated feed and have they been treated recently?
- ▶ proper storage of drugs: temperature, discarding drugs past their expiry date
- ▶ proper injection techniques: avoiding broken needles, using the correct size needles, being clean, proper restraint and injecting no more than 10 cc in one site
- ▶ reading drug labels: knowing withdrawal times
- ▶ mixing medicated feed: sequencing medicated feeds and finishing feeds to prevent cross contamination
- ▶ off label drug use: when you change the dosage from the label instructions, how do you change the withdrawal time? do you have veterinary advice?
- ▶ dealing with broken needles: is the pig identified and recorded, and is the processor notified?
- ▶ rodent control
- ▶ sanitation

▪ **How is the program being implemented?**

Writing such a program is challenging and is an ongoing task as mistakes are corrected and wording improved. The challenge is setting the height of the bar - the standards must be realistic for producers to comply with, yet be strict enough to have an impact on food safety. However, implementation can be the greater challenge. Ensuring the standards are interpreted and applied equally on all farms is critical to the credibility of the program, yet can be difficult to guarantee. Standardized training, regular checks of the system, and constant communication between the local delivery agencies are key.

Participation in the program is totally voluntary. Each of the provinces is responsible for administering the program to its producers. Either the provincial government, the provincial producer organization or a separate organization

dedicated to the program is being used to administer the program. Cost varies by province, depending on the organizing groups. The provinces are currently in various stages of signing up producers and training validators. Producer meetings are usually used to introduce producers to the program and explain requirements.

Producers are required to fill out an On-Farm Assessment Form which detail procedures used in the unit. Records of certain procedures, such as medicated feed mixing or drug use, are kept. A trained validator will then visit the farm to review the Assessment Form and records with the producer and staff. Because there are many different ways to farm, producers need to write their own procedures in certain areas. The goal of the validation visit is not enforcement, but rather education and discussion. A successful validation is lively discussion involving everyone who works with pigs in the unit and leaves the group with a thorough understanding of the issues and what to do about them. Awareness is the objective.

The validator completes a checklist which outlines those things a producer must do in order to be validated on the program. The validator forwards the checklist and his observations to the provincial program office. If all of the items have been completed, the producer is awarded a certificate. Validators are encouraged to be flexible, to work with producers to complete some sections and allow producers to correct things during the visit if need be.

▪ **Who are the Validators?**

The validators are practicing veterinarians or pork specialists that have undergone specific training by the program. The use of the herd health veterinarian is encouraged, as they will have the best knowledge of drug use practices on the farm and of drug use issues. All validators will have to take an exam and have regular retraining to ensure consistency and adequate knowledge. Veterinarians were chosen because they usually have the best knowledge of drug use on the farm, and often cover many of the areas of the program in a herd health visit. In areas where private veterinarians are not available, other specialists will need to be available. Hiring “inspectors” was not considered feasible because of the cost to the program and the logistics of visiting a large number of farms in a short period of time given biosecurity requirements.

A Validator’s Manual has been prepared by the CPC committee and a standardized training program has been developed. A standardized exam has also been developed to ensure a minimum level of knowledge. In order to ensure consistency in judgement of the standards, auditors will be trained to check on a sample of validated farms and validators.

▪ **What is progress to date?**

The CQA Producer Manuals were distributed in May 1998. In Alberta, producer meetings were held in June, and approximately 150 producers have signed up. The first validator training session was held in August, and more are planned. Other provinces are also signing up producers and training validators.

Alberta runs its program as “Alberta Quality Pork”, a partnership between Fletcher’s Fine Foods, Alberta Pork Producer’s Development Corporation, and Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Fletcher’s requires that producers be validated under the program in order to qualify for their “High Health” premium program. They are also supplying extra health data from carcasses to participating producers.

▪ **The Future of Quality Assurance Programs**

The success of voluntary QA programs depends to an extent on processors requiring them and getting value from them, either in better prices or market access. In the USA, by 1999, some large processors will be requiring that producers be part of their PQA program before they buy their hogs. This also means Canadian hogs must be under a recognized equivalent program such as CQA before they can be exported for slaughter to these plants. As Canadian processors take similar stands, it will drive the requirement for a credible, effectively run program.

In these times of negative publicity about animal agriculture and food safety, we need to be able to defend our livestock production practices for the reputation of the industry. We need to send the message that we are doing the best we can to raise our animals responsibly and not leaving the negative stories unchallenged. QA programs are one way of accomplishing this.

