

A Producers View of the Quality Assurance Program

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■ I'm a Believer

I'm a believer in the concept of the Quality Assurance Program. Consumers, whether domestic or those in the export market, have been indicating for years that they would like their comfort level raised with regards to food safety. Canadian producers already turn out a safe, healthy product and our reputation goes far beyond our borders. Quality Assurance, when fully implemented, will verify and document something that already exists and most of us already know.

Even though we producers know that we have a quality safe product, we must never assume that everyone is as convinced as we are. To illustrate this point let me quote from an article in the Globe and Mail on October 27, 2001 by Krista Foss. The first line starts out and says:

"From produce slick with preservatives to hormone pumped pork, what happens to food before it lands on our dinner plates has become a national pre-occupation: 74% of Canadians fret about its safety, according to a new poll."

The article goes on to tell of an Ipsos-Reid poll commissioned by the Globe and Mail and CTV that 35% of Canadians are "very concerned" about food safety issues while 39% were "somewhat" concerned. Canadians in the "most concerned" category identified three potential trouble spots in the supply chain as 1) the processors 2) restaurants and other food service outlets and 3) the farm. Even though I get quite irritated when I read irresponsible comments like "hormone pumped pork", the fact of the matter is that people are reading this stuff and unfortunately perception becomes reality.

The Quality Assurance Program (if my memory is correct) began with a concept that led to formal discussions which took place in 1995. Producer enrollment started in the fall of 1997. Our farm has an Enrollment Certificate hanging on

the wall dated November 10, 1997 with #7 in the top right hand corner, indicating that we were the seventh farm in Alberta to become involved in the program. The program is now four years down the road and there appears to be steady growth (albeit slow) and that is encouraging. From statistics in the summer of 2001 the enrollment in the program across Canada is about 63% of all the marketed hogs while the number of hogs coming from validated farms is about 26%. Alberta is slightly ahead of the national averages with about 74% of marketed hogs enrolled and 33% validated.

■ How the Program can be Improved

My criticism, which I hope is constructive, is that the process seems to be dragging on too long. Will we ever have all producers validated? What will it take for this to happen? From a producers point of view – I see very little reason to become validated other than for the philosophical reasons of doing it for the good of the industry. Most producers would need a more immediate result or consequence. My question to the packers is – when will there be a cost to the producer for not being validated and/or a bonus for going through the effort and expense of validation?

In Alberta, the validation process costs \$125 per hour plus mileage, so a bill of \$300 - \$400 can be expected. A feed sample also needs to be taken and analyzed costing another \$25.68.

Our farm is a contract holder to the Olymel High Health Purchase and Delivery Contract. The contract calls for a producer to become “accredited” within three months of signing on under the Alberta Quality Pork Program. I’m not sure if “accredited” means enrolled or validated, but in any event – will Olymel actually terminate contracts of producers who have not complied? If there are no consequences with “teeth” and if producers can acquire all the bonuses and benefits without spending the money to become validated – what will motivate them to do so?

Packers are accepting hogs from validated farms and also non-validated farms. To my knowledge there are no packers in Canada that receive only validated hogs. Do packers have a system in place where they can separate Quality Assurance hogs from non-Quality Assurance hogs? Unless the Quality Assurance hogs can be tracked, processed and labelled separately, how can we ever present a certified QA product to the consumer or the export markets?

The Quality Assurance Program has other hurdles to deal with. Producers have asked me why there is such a variance in the registration fees charged across the country. Some provinces have no fee. Others charge \$15 (Sask) or \$32.10 (Ont) and here in Alberta we charge \$150. In Alberta we spend about

\$150,000 on QA and CQA combined which is about 4 1/2 cents on every hog marketed. Are we spending money on a program that may never achieve its intended goal?

To my knowledge the program does not yet have an audit system. After validation should there not be a few random checks to see if compliance is maintained, just to keep everybody honest?

■ **Conclusion**

As much as I am happy to see the enrollment and validation numbers increasing, I don't think the program will be successful until there is universal or close to universal involvement by producers and until the packer can guarantee that the product in the package comes from a certified farm. For this to happen I believe that we will need a more determined effort by all the packers. The program seems to have wrinkles of its own to iron out without having to worry about the packers being totally committed. If producers are given some type of cost recovery and increased profit, in my opinion, there will be lots of eagerness for involvement in the program.