

Will we be told how to raise pigs? – Lessons from Europe

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■ Introduction

In Europe, consumers have become more discerning and more concerned about the food that they eat, creating the need for reassurance about the systems, which produce food. Concern has been heightened by a series of “food scares” both in Britain – Salmonella in eggs, BSE, E Coli 0157 – and in other countries such as Denmark which had an outbreak of Salmonella food poisoning caused by pork in the early 90’s. Most consumers have very little knowledge of farming or food production practices – in many industrialized nations only 1.5% of the population works in agriculture. This has added to the “fear factor” and fuelled a belief that intensive livestock are produced under horrific conditions and fed large amounts of antibiotics and hormones. The media, particularly the tabloid press, has exploited these concerns ruthlessly, especially in Britain, but also in Denmark and Germany. National governments and the EU have introduced ever tighter legislation in the areas of food safety, animal welfare and the environment especially from about 1990 onwards. At the same time participants in the food chain – primary producers, food processors and retailers – have introduced Quality Assurance systems to provide the reassurance customers have demanded. Some of these have been driven forwards by the retailers, others by the production and processing sectors.

Many areas relating to pig production have seen great change in Europe over the last 10-15 years such as sow housing, welfare standards, the use of antibiotic growth promoters, Salmonella control and traceability. These are now emerging as issues in North America. As a recent immigrant from Britain I can see similarities between the situation in Canada now and that in Europe in the mid 80’s to early 90’s. Many in the industry believe it is inevitable that we move in the same direction with regard to production practices and quality assurance. If so, can we learn some valuable lessons from the experience in Europe?

Canada, as a world exporter of pork also has to consider whether, in order to export pork to Europe, it will have to be produced under European conditions. Also, key competitors in other markets, such as the Danes, have a highly sophisticated quality assurance program. If Canada does not develop equivalent systems, will it be excluded from certain markets?

■ **The Pressure for Change**

Changes to production methods have come about in a number of ways:

Legislation

In countries such as Britain, Germany, Denmark and Sweden, pressure groups such as animal welfare organizations have successfully campaigned for, and got, legislation to ban the use of sow stalls. Some of these groups, such as Britain's Compassion in World Farming have huge budgets and are very influential.

Retailer demands

Retailers are seen as the conscience of their customers in that they make decisions about food standards on the customer's behalf. The consumer does not expect to purchase food that makes them ill from the retailer and there is a great deal of trust placed in Europe's major retailers. When this was threatened by food scares, retailers responded extremely quickly, and publicly, to allay those fears. Similarly consumers expect the pork or chicken they buy to have been produced under humane conditions. Changing expectations in terms of production conditions have led retailers, in turn, to demand change from primary producers. Many pig producers view the retailer's approach as dictatorial but then the word "customer" is missing from many farmers' vocabularies.

Consumer pressure

The dynamics of consumer attitudes, perceptions and buying preferences is complex. "Consumers" are not one body, but can be categorized according to their degree of concern about farming practices and how it influences their buying decisions. A small percentage of consumers are vocal in relaying their concerns to retailers and politicians, having a proportionately greater influence on the process of change. In order to make rational decisions about how to respond to perceived consumer concerns, participants in the food chain must fully understand consumer psychology. This requires detailed consumer research on a continuing basis to identify trends in attitude, beliefs and

knowledge. It may be expensive to satisfy the perceived demands of 10% of consumers if 90% are unwilling to pay for enhanced welfare or product quality.

■ European Quality Assurance Schemes

Many European countries have QA schemes for pork. These may be industry wide, such as in Denmark, Britain and the Netherlands, or branded meat quality programs, such as “Land-juwel” and EGO in Germany or very specific standards for the production of products such as Parma hams in Italy. Depending on the need, these include elements relating to production methods, transport, lairage, slaughtering and meat processing.

Britain

In Britain the first pig industry scheme was the Scottish Pig Industry Initiative which started in the late 80's as a means of differentiating Scottish pork – this still operates today. A similar scheme was established for England and Wales in the early 90's, although it has undergone a series of name and organizational changes. Assured British Pigs and associated schemes for transport and processing now cover all areas of the chain from the farm through to processing methods. In the mid 90's the farm assurance scheme was fairly basic and the major retailers developed their own production standards for suppliers. The Farm Assured British Pigs scheme, as it was then, responded by creating new standards which embraced almost all the areas where the retailers wanted change. This effectively created a set of unified baseline standards and removed the need for retailers to pursue their own schemes other than for specialist products such as “outdoor reared” pork.

In 1994, the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA) launched its own QA scheme, Freedom Food, with enhanced welfare standards, with pork and other livestock products sold with the Freedom Food logo by most major retailers. There are now 3000 farmer members in the scheme, 500 of them pig producers. All the British schemes are audited by national certification bodies.

Denmark

Denmark, as Europe's largest pork exporter, has had quality control systems in place for many years, mainly related to product quality. Due to the integrated nature of the industry, once standards are defined, they are applied rigidly by everyone. In the late 80's, as food safety concerns increased, they launched their “Microbiological Action Plan” and then in 1992 the Meat Safety Assurance Scheme which was specifically for the important UK bacon market. This was revised and extended to include the Salmonella Control Program and pig welfare component, becoming the Danish Quality Guarantee in 1996. The

system now included almost every aspect of the food chain but lacked detailed farm assurance standards. At this time, the British scheme had just become much more comprehensive and the Danes came under pressure from British producers and retailers to meet the same farm standards. In 1999, by which time the UK had phased out sow stalls, this pressure reached the point where Denmark had to respond. It developed a new set of farm standards embodied in the “Contract for UK Production”, broadly equivalent to the British ones including the requirement for group sow housing. Denmark also has specific quality standards for other important export markets such as Germany and Japan.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands evolved its own QA scheme over the same period as in Britain and Denmark. Called IKB – Integrated Chain Control – it was developed in the mid 80’s and introduced fully in 1992. It covers production standards, meat safety, traceability and product quality. Processors representing 97% of total capacity are members and 90% of all pigs slaughtered are covered by the scheme. The Netherlands had 28.8% of the UK bacon market (136,669 tonnes) in 2000 and the Danes 21.2% or 100,129 tonnes. While the Danes target the premium end of the market, the Dutch primarily sell on price. However, this is changing, so that Quality Control is becoming a more important tool in adding value and ensuring consistent quality.

■ Features of a Good QA System

A recent report by Britain’s Farm Animal Welfare Council (2001), a government advisory body, on the animal welfare implications of farm assurance schemes said that “the basic tenets of Farm Assurance are credibility, transparency and traceability”. It also noted that “methods of audit and assessment are critical to the consumer’s trust” and that the body carrying out these functions should be both competent and independent. The British and Danish schemes are accredited under two European Standards and use independent evaluators. Independent accreditation is therefore the first requirement of a good scheme. Second, clearly defined audit procedures are required. This starts with clear, unambiguous standards, but at the same time over-prescriptive standards are undesirable as they stifle creativity and create antipathy amongst producers. In order to deliver the transparency and rigor of inspection, leading to credibility, a scheme should have independent on-farm assessors, independent auditing of the system and random checking. It should also have well-defined procedures for non-compliance, for example suspension or removal from the scheme.

Integrated schemes – “from farm to plate” – deliver comprehensive reassurance to consumers for pork and other food items. They also avoid the

confusion of several schemes within the food chain and allow an identifying mark to be used at the point of sale.

■ **Lessons from Europe**

The process of developing QA schemes and changing production practices in order to satisfy retailer and consumer demands in Europe has not been a smooth one because of the differing views and interests of the food chain participants. Here are some of the lessons I think we have learned:

- Understand consumer attitudes in detail – what they know about production practices and which aspects concern them – and take this into account when developing QA schemes.
- Work together with processors and retailers on standards. Find out what they want now and are likely to want in future. Agree on standards and time scales so that everyone can support them and, if necessary, defend them, especially from animal welfare pressure groups.
- Be pro-active with your food chain partners in developing QA systems and improving standards, otherwise change may be forced upon you.
- Phase in agreed changes over a period of time so that producers know in advance what is required, especially if this involves changes to facilities.
- Move towards using group housing for sows if building a new barn or remodeling – this will increase marketing opportunities in future. There is enough experience to draw on in Europe to ensure that group systems are neither more expensive nor less productive than stalls.
- Use the scheme to identify the product to consumers and increase confidence by use of a “quality mark” – link this to advertising and promotion.
- Don’t expect a premium for the product. Industry integrated schemes set the baseline for product quality
- Sell the benefits of the system effectively to producers who often don’t understand the market beyond the farm gate – better liaison between producers, processors and retailers helps in this respect.
- Don’t give the consumer too much detail about production practices unless they ask specifically. I know I mentioned transparency but people do not want to know about tail docking and castration – they need broad reassurance that gives them a nice warm feeling about eating pork.

■ Conclusions

The last 10 years has seen the rapid development of pork Quality Assurance schemes in Europe in response to increased consumer awareness of food safety, animal welfare and the environment. All parts of the food chain have played a part in this process. At times, retailers have made demands, but often it has been the production and processing sectors that have taken the initiative. There are signs in North America that similar pressures will face the pork industry. Partners in the pork chain need to work together to identify the issues, agree on standards and develop these into an integrated QA system which is responsive and continues to develop. By being pro-active and staying ahead of the game we can positively influence consumer opinions and hopefully avoid damaging “food scares”, whether they relate to the use of antibiotics, Salmonella or pig welfare. In export markets, Canada competes with countries such as Denmark, which has the best quality control and Quality Assurance systems in the world. The need for similar systems in future is obvious.

So, in response to the question posed by the title – “Will we be told how to raise pigs?” My answer is – ***“Only if we don’t respond positively to consumer requirements and initiate change ourselves”.***

■ References

Farm Animal Welfare Council (2001) Interim Report on the Animal Welfare Implications of Farm Assurance Schemes