By Rob Eirich, UNL Extension

Nebr. Beef Quality Assurance

Assessments and audits are becoming a part of doing business in beef cattle production, as we are seeing beef processors implementing third-party audits. Since beginning as the Nebraska Director of Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) in July, I have been studying and gathering information on the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Assessment Guides and third-party audits in the beef industry.

Audits are not new and have been an element of many branded products as a verification tool. Nebraska Cattlemen, Nebraska BQA and NCBA are not implementing or endorsing these audits, but are educating and preparing beef cattle producers for these verification practices.

The dictionary defines assessment as the act of appraisal or evaluation, and audit as the act of officially examining for verification. I will outline their implementation in the beef industry.

The first question beef cattle producers have is "why?" An answer lies in the findings of the 2011 National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA), which shows that today's consumers want to know "how and where the cattle were raised" that produced their beef products. These consumers are concerned with food safety and eating satisfaction.

Packers, food service and retailers are looking for a verified, creditable supply to meet the demands of their consumers. Implementing third-party audits will verify that producers use best management practices to insure the health, care and well-being of the animals under their stewardship. For producers this is part of "product integrity," which shows their commitment to producing a wholesome, safe, and quality beef product each and every time for our consumers.

The key elements of third-party audits include BQA training, site assessment, daily observation, facilities, animal handling/care, and process of euthanasia. BQA training of all people working with animal care is important to maintain the implementation of best-management practices to insure animal well-being.

In the site assessment, auditors will review all standard operating procedures, documentation and records of the operation to ensure animal care is a high priority of production. Auditors will also observe daily routines, including animal handling and care, processing, facilities, facility maintenance, and feed processing and delivery. These observations will be documented and evaluated to meet the guidelines set by the organizations asking for the third-party audit and developed with best management practices in mind.

Can an operation fail an audit? The current answer is simply “no,” but there may be need for re-evaluation and corrective measures taken. The audits being implemented will be explained up front to all cattle suppliers before audit occurs.

The third-party auditors will do the reviews and observations of the operation, then document the finds. The auditor will record results as 1) acceptable (meets guidelines), 2) needs improvement (requires action), or 3) unacceptable (must be corrected). These findings will be reported and discussed with operation management. If any observations do not meet the guidelines, management will be asked re-evaluate the standard operating procedures and make corrective changes. It is a goal of the audits to help define the best management practices and educate suppliers in producing a high quality beef product for the consumers.

Producers can prepare for third-party audits by going to the Nebraska BQA website at bqa.unl.edu and finding NCBA and National BQA Assessment Guides for three segments of cattle production—feedyard, stockers and cow-calf. These assessments were developed incorporating sound animal care and production practices with proven science and research understanding.

The guides are an on-site educational tool that allows for assessment of animal care and well-being as well as operation facilities and conditions. The guides can be used as a self-assessment tool in developing a strategic plan, implementing standard operating procedures, and preparing documentation needed to meet guidelines of third party audits.

Audits and assessment will become part of routine for beef cattle suppliers, but I am confident that Nebraska producers will meet the benchmarks set before them. As Nebraska becomes the epicenter of global beef production, Nebraska producers are passionate and dedicated to producing wholesome, safe, healthy and high-quality beef. Nebraska BQA is committed to educating and preparing beef cattle producers to meet the demands of today's consumers.

For more information about Nebraska Beef Quality Assurance or to get BQA certification, contact Rob Eirich, UNL Extension Educator and Nebraska Director of BQA at the UNL Panhandle Research and Extension Center 308.632.1230 or reirich2@unl.edu .

Beef Quality Assurance is a nationally coordinated, state implemented program that provides systematic information to U.S. beef producers and beef consumers of how common sense husbandry techniques can be coupled with accepted scientific knowledge to raise cattle under optimum management and environmental conditions. Eirich directs the program in the state of Nebraska, in a partnership between UNL Extension, Nebraska Cattlemen, and the Nebraska Beef Council.