

Verified Beef

PRODUCTION

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Verified Beef Production

Developments simplify, strengthen Verified Beef Production program

Canada's beef on-farm food safety program gains momentum

The Verified Beef Production (VBP) program is attracting Canadian producers in significant numbers, driven in part by its third-party verification system which offers a platform for marketing around food safety. There have been several adjustments made to the program in order to better tailor it to the needs of Canadian beef producers, says program manager Terry Grajczyk. Here's an overview of ongoing developments.

Program simplified. After starting out as a program covering food quality, animal welfare and food safety, the VBP program updated its manual in 2006 to focus exclusively on food safety. In the process, action items in the manual were divided into clearly-highlighted categories of "must do's" and "recommendations" with extra emphasis placed on clear wording.

Validation process streamlined. Participants who want to be officially registered with the VBP program are verified through a third-party, audit-style process.

"Before September 2006, the optional validation assessment was not clear. This is no longer the case," says Grajczyk. "Now, after the initial on-farm audit required to become validated in the program, participants declare their conformance by sending in their records or an annual self-declaration. This reduces concerns producers may have over audit costs while still keeping it credible in the international marketplace."

Still a grassroots program. VBP's identity as a voluntary, industry-driven program is still a point of pride, says Grajczyk. "Although we work with government as partners, VBP is not a government program and there is no intention of making it mandatory," she says.

Not to be confused with age verification. Despite any connection the name may imply, age verification does not fall under the VBP mandate. "It's easy to mix up age verification with the Verified Beef program, but there are important differences," says Grajczyk. "VBP is about food safety – it's an internal program with no entry of data required. Meanwhile, age verification, which is administered by the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency, is a database-driven system that allows packers to sort carcasses for different orders. Two programs, similar names, but two very different outcomes."

Program gaining momentum. Uptake of the VBP program is on an upward curve, with about 7,100 producers having registered in the program as of January 1st, 2008 increasing to just over 11,000 producers in January 2009.

"The bottom line is that producers recognize that VBP is an industry-driven program and validation is a simple process. As a result, we've had positive word of mouth that has helped drive the program," she says.

VBP workshops now available online

Beef producers across Canada wishing to participate in the VBP on-farm food safety program can now complete their workshops online. That will improve availability of the program in all regions, says the national manager of the program.

The online workshops offer producers the same information and preparation they would receive at a live workshop, including an overview of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that support on-farm food safety, says Terry Grajczyk.

"This new online workshop feature is designed to improve VBP workshop access for producers in remote areas and for others who simply prefer the convenience of online training," she says. "With more and more producers today using the Web as a resource, we feel this online training tool is a good fit for VBP and its participants."

For more information on VBP online workshops contact the provincial VBP coordinator listed under "VBP Across Canada" at the VBP Web site, www.verifiedbeef.org, or contact the provincial cattle association office.

Verified Beef Production learns from the world

New study gives an overview of other countries' progress in on-farm food safety

With consumers demanding increasingly higher standards of food production, it's become clear to most Canadian producers that what they do at home is directly connected to how Canadian-produced food is seen around the world. Food safety is seen as a key link in building a brand management package that is marketable to consumers and others in the food chain.

But what do you do in a world where so many other countries are marketing around the same principles? The first step, says Terry Grajczyk, program manager of Verified Beef Production (VBP), Canada's on-farm food safety program for beef, is to be aware of what they are doing. That's why the Canadian On-Farm Food Safety (COFFS) Working Group, a multi-commodity organization that works on issues common to Canadian on-farm food safety programs, recently released a report comparing OFFS programs in several countries, including Canada, the U.S. and Australia.

The bottom line is that what Canada is doing with its OFFS program is fundamentally in line with what several competitors are doing. "That can give producers some comfort that the Canadian beef industry is competitive with other countries that are marketing around food safety."

Canadian characteristics. The VBP program's strengths, says Grajczyk, are based in its standardized national approach, its foundation in established international standards and its recognition by government. When designing the program, she says the goal was to take an optimum approach to international standards that would minimize the financial burden on participants.

"A lot of international standards are designed for processing plants and other places where there are specific controls in place," she says. "However, it's difficult and costly to apply these standards consistently and thoroughly in the context of a farm or ranch because of the unpredictability of Mother Nature. We took the optimum, moderate approach."

The U.S. The U.S. Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program includes a more limited risk analysis than that attached to the VBP program and tends to focus more on education, says Grajczyk. Although there is no conformance assessment in the BQA program, some states have begun to put random audits in place.

"Also, there are several government conformance assessments for some types of quality management programs that some beef partnerships are using. However, these tend to be limited to age, source and non-synthetic hormone treated cattle claims."

Australia. Australia currently has a program based on self-declaration with national identification included. However, it is planning on moving toward a more detailed program with conformance assessment based on random sampling, says Grajczyk. Presently, the Australian Livestock Production Assurance Quality Assurance program does not explicitly require application of HACCP principles or equivalent ISO 9001 requirements.

New program brands Canadian beef

VBP a fit for global marketing under Canadian Beef Advantage

In a global market where beef industries worldwide are building brands based on food safety and other attributes favoured by consumers today, it's important for the Canadian beef industry to act aggressively in order to stay competitive. That's the thinking behind the new Canadian Beef Advantage program.

Canadian Beef Advantage, spearheaded by the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, is an effort intended to leverage Canada's animal health system, beef quality, and international perception as a clean, pristine environment into a global branding opportunity. Adherence to HACCP-based standards, the same standards on which the VBP program is based, plays a key role in the Canadian Beef Advantage marketing strategy.



For more information

To get more information on the Verified Beef Production program, visit the website at www.verifiedbeef.org or contact the VBP office in your area.

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