



# Cattle Producer's Handbook

Quality Assurance Section

240

## National Beef Quality Audits: A Review of the Past, A Look into the Future

*Jon Hogge, University of Idaho Extension Educator Jefferson and Clark Counties*

Over the past several years the National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA) has given direction to cow-calf operations all over the U.S. The audit has given excellent information to producers, packers, and consumers alike. The audit has changed a small amount in the way it collects its data from the consumer. Improvements in data collection for the NBQA have led to more precision in the recommendations made each time an audit has been conducted.

The audits are funded through the Beef Check Off, which is administered by the Cattlemen's Beef Board. The audits are based on a set of three core principles:

- **Core 1 (Face-to-face interviews):** NBQA conducted interviews over 11 months with feeders, packers, retailers, foodservice operators, and allied industry/government employees who defined and ranked seven quality categories—(1) how and where cattle were raised; (2) lean, fat, and bone; (3) weight and size; (4) cattle genetics; (5) visual characteristics; (6) food safety; and (7) eating satisfaction.
- **Core 2 (Research teams):** Teams surveyed 18,000 carcasses on the harvest floor from eight beef processing plants, determined quality and yield grade from 9,000 chilled carcasses from 28 beef processing plants, and compared instrument-grading results with USDA grader information on 2.4 million carcasses from 17 plants.
- **Core 3 (Surveys):** Surveys were conducted to determine the adoption of Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) practices and management principles. The surveys were conducted using both online and written questions resulting in 3,755 responses from seedstock operators, commercial cow-calf producers, backgrounders, stocker/yearling operators, feedlot producers, and dairymen.

### Review of the Past

Since its inception, consumers have changed their opinions regarding what is important relative to beef quality. When discussing consumers, we are not strictly meaning the retail consumer but all of the market chain. In the 2000 audit, the consumer focused on overall uniformity, carcass weights, tenderness, marbling, reduced quality due to implants, and external fat. According to the 2005 audit, consumers identified new concerns. Those concerns differing from the 2000 audit were traceability, instrument grading, market signals, and segmentation.

As the National Cattlemen's Beef Association BQA program worked on these concerns during the past 6 years and made great progress in educating producers, the needs and concerns of consumers changed once again to what we have today in the 2011 audit. The most recent challenges identified by consumers are food safety; eating satisfaction; how and where the cattle were raised; lean, fat, and bone; weight and size; and cattle genetics.

The 2011 audit clearly defined and ranked the current challenges and emphasized consumer concerns and the necessity for feedback signals up and down the beef marketing chain. The top three challenges were (1) food safety, (2) eating satisfaction, and (3) how and where the cattle were raised. When asked what the top weaknesses of the beef industry were, the participants listed industry fragmentation and not effectively telling the beef story. Food safety issues and variability in the product were also identified as barriers.

What does nonconformance (not meeting the ideal targets for quality) cost the beef industry? The audit determined that more than \$40 per head were not real-