

Verified Beef

PRODUCTION



INDUSTRY UPDATE

Volume 5 • Issue 2 • November 2010

Verified Beef Production

Why on-farm food safety will continue to be important

Confidence on our food products starts on the farm

One of the opportunities of sitting in on many industry meetings throughout the year is the chance to hear directly from people involved in managing the agri-food industry.

Not all of those comments are intended for public consumption, but they give a clear flavor of what the managers involved on the frontlines of the industry see as important. Here are some examples of why on-farm food safety will continue to be important.

As an example of the continual stream of evidence of why consumers are driving new expectations in food safety, one speaker pointed out that one in 13 people now have a food allergy, from mild to severe. Medications and immunosuppressants change human response to pathogens, so food safety is critically important.

Food safety is a culture. It's a reflection of everything from ecosystem health to attitudes, awareness and behaviors. It has been described as a "team sport."

"Being good isn't good enough. We've got to continually get better."

One presentation broke out three key areas that will require work. One area is good performance indicators for food safety. Consumers want to understand performance dynamics. They want to know what is being done, who is compliant, who is not, who are repeat offenders. They want to know about current issues; some wonder about pathogen load on the farm, for example.

They also wonder who should fund and develop this food safety area, public or private, and how to create incentives for success. International efforts such as the Global Food Safety Initiative among retailers is gaining momentum.

A second area of change is what are the baseline indicators on practice change and where can we change regulatory efforts to make a difference. Some regulatory efforts will need to be increased, some decreased. If we understand the fundamental causes we can move forward more effectively to control.

Thirdly, we need to consider other factors around food safety confidence. Things like humane slaughter and antimicrobial resistance are important. We need to be good communicators on food safety and make progress before we find ourselves in crisis situations. Food safety needs to be framed within the Canada brand.

Needless to say, food safety efforts need to be transparent, and we need to ensure the good operators get recognized and the bad ones don't take us down with them. That means sharing information to back up that understanding.

In Canada the VBP program is working to meet those kinds of questions. It is designed to mesh with marketing efforts such as the Beef Information Centre and other Canadian Cattlemen's Association programs. On-farm food safety has the potential to add value when it is integrated into efforts to build Canada's overall brand.

VBP numbers continue to grow

Producers continue to support the role of on-farm food safety

Mid-year figures for 2010 for the Verified Beef Production (VBP) program show that the number of beef cattle operations completing VBP workshops in Canada now totals over 14,300. That's an estimated 35 to 45 percent of national beef cattle production and an increase of nearly 26 percent over the same period in 2009.

Growth in the 2009-2010 season has been largely the result of improving interest from the feedlot sector. June 2010 estimates are that VBP trained operations account for just over 30 percent of cow-calf production and 63 percent of feedlot production.

Nearly 500 operations are now registered with VBP, which means they have undergone the optional on-farm validation audit and conform to program requirements.

Another sign of growing interest is the use of the VBP online training module. That tool allows producers to take basic VBP training online from home or their local library. Approximately 620 operations have requested that module and nearly 75 percent have completed that course.

VBP Across Canada - www.verifiedbeef.org

Historic Reesor Ranch adds VBP to their business plan

VBP fits this ranch's direct-to-consumer marketing

When WD Reesor came out west from Ontario in 1904 and filed his claim in the Cypress Hills, he couldn't envision the future the next generations would be carving out on that same homestead.

Today WD's great grandson Scott, his wife Theresa and their children, still live on that original homestead, still run a cow-calf operation, and like their forefathers are still breaking into new territory. They have a thriving guest ranch, sell a small amount of beef off the ranch to guests and have expanded into selling bottled water from a spring on their land under the Reesor Springs label.

With many direct-to-consumer opportunities and a passion for their industry, the Verified Beef Production (VBP) program was an obvious addition to their operation.

They heard about VBP in the fall of 2009 and moved quickly to full participation.

Why VBP

At the year-round guest ranch, the opportunity to connect directly with consumers is one that most beef producers never get. VBP complements the conversations they are already having with guests and illustrates their commitment to livestock production.

The VBP process proved easy to adapt. After completing the workshop, they took the materials home to the ranch and haven't found much additional effort required in keeping things up-to-date. "They were all things we were doing already, it was just a matter of doing the paperwork and recording it," says Scott. "Any extra work that goes into it is outweighed by the benefits we get out of it."

The Reesors completed the initial validation audit in June and are happy with the process. "It was a really good day with our auditor. We went through the checklist and covered all the food safety issues, medication, safe injection sites and withdrawal times in just a few hours," says Theresa.

The Reesors have become standard bearers for the VBP program, discussing it with family, friends and neighbours. "People see the signs on the property and on our website and ask what that means. We are always looking for good stories in the beef industry to share," says Theresa.



Scott believes the majority of producers are already well versed in the Best Management Practices that are the basis of the VBP program. "They may not realize it and look at VBP as more work, but it fits within most programs."

The ultimate industry goal, Theresa adds, is for the market to recognize the additional value to consumers of having a strong VBP program. Stronger recognition of good stewardship practices will encourage consumers to eat more beef and will add value to the producer's business and to the industry as a whole.

For more information on the VBP program go to www.verifiedbeef.org. For more information on the Reesor Ranch go to www.reesorranh.com.

Industry news

Borderline Feeders of Ceylon, Sask. have won a provincial Chamber of Commerce award for community involvement. They are registered with VBP and are featured in an earlier article on the VBP website.

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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