

## The Importance of Beef Quality Assurance for Youth

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The average age of the American farmer and rancher is a much discussed topic. According to the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture, the average age of the American farmer is 57.1, and the average age of beef producers is even greater at 57.8, with the majority of beef producers falling in the age 65 and older category. Perhaps even more concerning for the beef industry is the large size of the group of producers age 65 and older, and the relatively small number of young producers. If we plan to feed a projected world population of over 9 billion by 2050, keeping young people involved and excited about the beef industry is vital.

Along with keeping young people active stakeholders in the beef industry for years to come, it is important to instill sound management and handling practices in youth at a young age so that these practices become routine. This is where the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program comes into play. According to the BQA home page ([www.bqa.org](http://www.bqa.org)) “the program raises consumer confidence through offering proper management techniques and a commitment to quality within every segment of the beef industry.” Not only is consumer confidence raised with the BQA program, but herd profitability can even be improved through the implementation of these best management practices. This becomes even more important with the increased spotlight on animal well-being and handling methods, and assures the public that producers, both young and old are committed to providing a safe and wholesome product.

The BQA program is based ultimately on several core beliefs that are summed up well in the guiding principles of the program.

- WE BELIEVE production practices affect consumer acceptance of beef.
- WE BELIEVE the BQA Program has and must continue to empower beef producers to improve the safety and wholesomeness of beef.
- WE BELIEVE these fundamental principles are the fabric of the BQA Program.
  - *Empowering people*...because producers can make a difference.
  - *Taking responsibility*...because it's our job, not someone else's.
  - *Working together*...because product safety and wholesomeness is everyone's business.

A common theme in the BQA program is that information presented must be a common sense method based on scientific knowledge. While the program is coordinated on the national level, it is implemented on a state by state basis. Information provided in the training program is designed to provide U.S. beef producers with the knowledge to be sure their cattle are raised under optimum management and environmental conditions and to take pride in the product they produce.

Today's BQA program evolved from a program called Beef Safety Assurance that began in the 1970's to target both real and perceived beef safety issues. It was designed to ensure that violative chemical residues were not present in marketed beef. Today's BQA has become much more than a safety assurance program. BQA programming is expanding with information to help producers implement best management practices that improve both quality grades and yield grades of beef carcasses, and ultimately provide the safest, tastiest product to consumers. Previous National Beef Quality Audits have summarized that to keep beef competitive on the

market the beef industry must improve beef quality, uniformity, and consistency. The BQA program has made great strides since its implementation. For example, a major finding from previous National Beef Quality Audits injection site lesions from producers giving injections in primal cuts of meat were a major problem, however the number of injection site lesions has been greatly reduced in the 10 years since the 1991 audit, indicating that BQA is making great strides.

BQA programs have evolved over time to include best practices in several areas, including good record keeping and protecting herd health, which can result in more profits for producers. When better quality cows leave the farm and reach the market place, the producer, packer, and consumer all benefit. When better quality beef reaches the supermarket, consumers are more confident in the beef they are buying, and this increases beef consumption.

The Mississippi Beef Quality Assurance (MS-BQA) Program identifies areas in beef production where defects in quality occur. The MS-BQA Program is a cooperative effort between beef producers, veterinarians, nutritionists, and professionals from the Mississippi Cattlemen's Association, Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation, MSU Extension Service, and MSU College of Veterinary Medicine, who believe that cattle managed under BQA guidelines will be less likely to contain a violative residue, injection-site tissue damage, or foreign metal such as a broken needle. The program asks everyone involved with beef production to follow the FDA/USDA/EPA guidelines for product use and to use common sense, reasonable management skills, and accepted scientific knowledge to avoid product defects at the consumer level. After all, consumers purchase what they trust, and their confidence is the basis of our industry's and our children's future. More information about the Mississippi BQA program can be found at: <http://msucares.com/livestock/beef/bqa/index.html>. Look for upcoming live BQA training sessions in your region in the future. FREE BQA training is available online through April 15 by visiting [www.bqa.org/team](http://www.bqa.org/team).

Youth specific BQA programs are available online through <https://www.animalcaretraining.org/index.aspx>. These free online modules are offered to youth high school age and younger. There are 28 modules to be completed, which each take between 5 and 20 minutes to complete. There is no time limit to complete the training, and after completion and passing quizzes with 80% accuracy or higher, a certificate is provided to the participant.

The importance of empowering our beef industry youth with the knowledge of best management practices to keep them involved and profitable in the beef industry is vital to future success. Our beef industry youth are the future of the industry and training them to be leaders in the future as well as the present is extremely important.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit [msucares.com/livestock/beef](http://msucares.com/livestock/beef).

References:

National Beef Quality Assurance. [www.bqa.org](http://www.bqa.org)