

## Age & Source Verification Implications For Cow-Calf Producers

As the Japanese and other foreign markets reopened to US beef, there is increasing demand for Source and Age Verified cattle. New beef export regulations have clearly defined the meaning of Age and Source Verification, as age and source claims must be documented and verified through a recognized USDA program. These programs include the USDA Process Verified Program (PVP) or a USDA Quality System Assessment (QSA).

Current and future strategies for cow/calf producers regarding age and source verification is the focus of this month's article. A brief review of some program definitions is included as well as management procedures producers should consider.

### What are all these programs and terms?

Without getting into a detailed discussion about requirements for the export market, let's go over a few terms/programs.

"The USDA Process Verified Program (PVP) provides suppliers of agricultural products or services the opportunity to assure customers of their ability to provide consistent quality products or services. It is limited to programs or portions of programs where specified process verified points are supported by a documented quality management system. The specified process verified points are identified by the supplier." <sup>1</sup>

Process Verified Programs are the highest level of certification in which companies have certified their entire production process or large portions of their process. This includes detailed procedures, record systems, and audit process. In the case of age and source verification, PVP programs create a documented, auditable procedure for the collection and transfer of age and source information.

There are currently 25 USDA PVP companies/organizations. Examples of PVP companies include beef processors (Smithfield Beef Group, PM Beef Group, Creekstone Farms) and information management companies (AgInfoLink, eMerge, IMI Global, etc). Obtaining PVP certification is complex and extremely expensive. A portion of the company's employees will be dedicated to maintaining the integrity of the program, managing records and handling audits. Process Verified Program Certification is not something an individual producer or even a county group of producers will likely undertake.

"The USDA Quality System Assessment (QSA) Program provides suppliers of agricultural products and services the opportunity to assure customers of their ability to provide consistent quality products or services. It is limited to programs or portions of programs where specified product requirements are supported by a documented quality management system. The specified product requirements may be identified by the supplier or in a USDA Export Verification (EV) Program." <sup>2</sup>

Quality System Assessment Programs are similar to PVP programs in many ways, although a QSA generally involves certification of a system that may involve several entities. These companies or groups have certified through USDA a system of records and procedures that can verify their claims to specific attributes of their product. For source and age verification, most beef processors have an approved QSA for exporting beef. This QSA describes how age/source will be documented by the packer with cooperation from source feedlots and their producer suppliers (cow-calf producers).

As with a PVP, QSA certification requires considerable records, labor, and capital to establish. The program is regularly audited and must have auditing procedures as part of their certification. Entities with approved USDA QSA programs include packers and large beef feeders (AgriBeef, Cargill, and Texas Cattle Feeders).

### **Role of PVP and QSA Programs in Exporting Beef**

USDA has established Beef Export Verification (EV) Program 3 requirements for selling beef internationally. These requirements outline the specific requirements for each country, including what products may be exported, processing regulations, and stipulations for the cattle producing the beef. In the case of Japan, a specific requirement is that the beef be from cattle of 20 months of age or less. For most other countries (Hong Kong, Mexico, Canada), the age requirement is 30 months or less. These EV age regulations must be met through cattle from a USDA Process Verified Program that requires age verification, or from a USDA QSA Program that requires age verification. Simply put, beef is not eligible for export to Japan unless it comes from cattle less than 20 months of age and from cattle certified through a PVP or QSA.

### **So What Does This Mean to Me - a Cow-Calf Producer?**

Age and Source Verification have taken on a new meaning. For calves to be truly Source and Age Verified, they must be enrolled in a PVP or QSA as previously described. Simply stating "source and age verified" may quickly become analogous to stating the cattle "have had all their shots." It has been established a signed affidavits will not substitute for documentation provided through a USDA approved PVP or QSA.

To sell calves as Source and Age Verified, cow/calf producers will most likely be providing information to a QSA or PVP program. When participating in a PVP Program, producers will supply the necessary documentation for source and age and be able to sell their calves as "USDA Process Verified." Thereby, these calves would be recognized in the industry as being Source and Age Verified and this verification could be utilized by cattle feeders and processors to fulfill the requirements of their QSA for Export Verification. Therefore, PVP certified cattle for age should meet the documentation requirements for any cattle feeder or packer (ie. PVP cattle will meet the requirements of multiple QSA programs).

Currently, producers retaining ownership are working with their feeders to provide the necessary documentation and paperwork to fulfill the requirements of a packer QSA. These QSA's are specific for each packer, and each has different forms and procedures. In many cases, the producer needs to receive training from the feedlot as part of the requirement of the QSA. In some instances, producers which have sold feeder cattle have been contacted by feedyards requesting the information for a QSA.

Do you need to enroll your cattle in a QSA or PVP program right now? No, that is up to you as an individual. However, you and your marketing partners should consider discussing how you may provide the information when the opportunity presents itself. Also, it will be important to continue to keep up with the situation as programs and opportunities are constantly evolving.

More information on how VQA cattle may be Source and Age Verified will be available this spring through VA Cooperative Extension and the VA Cattlemen's Association.

### **What Records Do I Need to Keep?**

The key item in this new era of source and age verification is records and documentation. Unfortunately, there are no standardized forms that fit all PVP or QSA programs (although the required information is essentially the same). Each program has their own forms, but by keeping certain basic types of information you can be ready for Source and Age Verification.

Here are basic recommendations for records to keep and procedures to perform:

Tag all cows and calves with a unique number in your herd. Tag calves at or near birth. Freeze branding cows is not a bad idea.

Keep detailed calving records such as the IRM Red Book. This includes calf ID, dam ID calving date, and sex of calf. At the very least, record the date the first calve was born and the day the last calf was born. Keep records in a safe, readily accessible location.

Keep records of all cattle sales.

Become a BQA certified producer.

Keep BQA records up to date as required. Record all vaccinations, dewormings, implanting, or health treatments.

Will keeping these records make my calves eligible for all QSA or PVP programs? Maintaining items 1 to 3 listed above will provide the minimum information needed for many programs. Adding items 4 & 5 may increase your options, realizing that some programs may have additional requirements.

Records need to be kept for three years after birth of the animal. Producers will need to show the actual records to auditors from the QSA or PVP program if requested.

In almost all cases, cattle that are destined for a Source and Age Verification program will need to be tagged with an RFID (electronic) eartag. Whether the tag will have to be applied by the cow/calf producer (most often) or at the feedyard will be determined by the particular program or feeder that purchases or receives the cattle.

Good luck during calving season and keep those calving books up-to-date.

USDA Process Verified Program 2005 <http://processverified.usda.gov/>

The USDA Quality System Assessment Program <http://www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/arc/qsap.htm>

USDA Export Verification Program <http://www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/arc/bev.htm>

Source: John B. Hall, Extension Animal Scientist, Beef, Virginia Tech