

Age and Source Verification: Implications for Cow-Calf Producers

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As the Japanese and other foreign markets reopened to U.S. beef, there is increasing demand for source- and age-verified cattle. These export markets require that age and source claims 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), two separate programs that will meet the export requirements of all our trading partners. Once a producer has decided to market animals as source and age verified, the difficult question becomes which program is the best one to use.

What Is the Difference Between These 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.

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 processes. 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 28 USDA PVP companies/organizations. Examples of PVP companies include beef processors (Cargill, 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 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.

Quality System Assessment programs are similar to PVP programs in many ways, although a QSA generally involves certification of

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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 its certification. Entities with approved USDA QSA programs include packers and large beef feeders (AgriBeef, Cargill and Texas Cattle Feeders). The State of Arkansas, under the direction of the Department of Agriculture, is currently working to establish a state-sponsored QSA program. It is too early to tell when the program will be operational or what costs will be involved, but it will be an option to cattle producers in the near future.

Role of PVP and QSA Programs in Exporting Beef

USDA has established Beef Export Verification (EV) Program requirements for selling beef internationally. These requirements outline the specific requirements for each country, including which 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 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 equivalent to stating the cattle “have had all their shots.” It has been established that a signed affidavit 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 PVP or QSA 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 (i.e., 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 QSAs 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 who have sold feeder cattle have been contacted by feedyards requesting the information for a QSA.

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 its 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:

1. Tag all calves with a unique number in your herd at or near birth. Ideally, all cows should also be identified. Freeze branding cows or recording Bangs tag numbers is not a bad idea as a backup to lost ear tags.
2. Keep detailed calving records such as the IRM Red Book or Arkansas Herd Inventory Program Herd Book (AG87; available at your county Extension office). This includes calf ID, dam ID, calving date and sex of calf. At the very least, record the date the first calf was born and the day the last calf was born. Keep records in a safe, readily accessible location.
3. Keep records of all cattle sales.

4. Become a BQA-certified producer.
5. 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 PVP or QSA programs? Maintaining items one, two and three listed above will provide the minimum information needed for many programs. Adding items four and five 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 PVP or QSA program if requested.

In almost all cases, cattle destined for a source and age verification program will need to be tagged with an RFID (electronic) ear tag. 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 who purchases or receives the cattle.

Summary

Do you need to enroll your cattle in a PVP or QSA program right now? No, that is up to you as an individual. It will be important to continue to keep up with the situation as programs and opportunities are constantly evolving. Source and age verification is an excellent way to differentiate and add value to your calves at marketing. It does require more record-keeping and possible extra expense, but for most producers who sell more than 50 calves each year, the increase in value of the calf outweighs the expense of the program.

For more information on source and age verification programs, contact your local county extension office.