

Pork producers promise 'Plus'

Pork producers create "PQA Plus" to assure consumers of the highest levels of pork safety and swine welfare with a credible, workable and affordable program.

By **ROD SMITH**

PORK producers recently voted to make their "responsibility" their "promise" to care for their animals at the highest levels of health and welfare, combining food safety and swine welfare practices into one program.

Producer-delegates to the National Pork Act and National Pork Producers Council (NPPC), in separate actions at the National Pork Forum in Anaheim, Cal., March 1-3, adopted "PQA Plus" (Pork Quality Assurance Plus) and encouraged all producers to enroll in the program when it's launched during the World Pork Expo in June.

PQA Plus combines PQA, which was created in 1989 and involves science-based guidelines for drug use in swine production for pork safety, and Swine Welfare Assurance Program (SWAP), which was created in 2003 and involves science-based guidelines for swine husbandry and welfare (*Feedstuffs*, June 26, 1989, and Aug. 25, 2003).

The concept of combining the two programs was announced at the Pork Expo last year (*Feedstuffs*, June 19, 2006).

Being and doing

In remarks to delegates, Hugh Dorminy, a former president of the National Pork Promotion & Research Board who led the formation of PQA Plus, said producers always have been and are strong supporters of animal welfare. "It's what we do and who we are," he said. "It's an ethical and moral obligation. It makes good business sense, too, but that's a side benefit" from being committed to animal welfare.

Dorminy (pictured) cited several surveys that have found consumers believe it's okay to raise animals for food and distinguish between farm and food animals and household pets. However, he noted that the surveys also have revealed consumers are concerned farmers are "failing" in their animal welfare and want assurance that animals are being well treated, including laws and regulations if necessary.

This concern prompted restaurant and retail companies — the pork industry's customers — to ask questions about how animals are handled on the farms, Dorminy

said. This prompted the Pork Board to form a diverse group of producers, packers and foodservice and retail representatives in March 2005 that began meeting to determine how to create "a system that would be credible, workable and affordable" and meet the concerns of consumers about animal welfare, he said.

He said it was at one of these meetings that one of the customer representatives, who was very familiar with and supportive of PQA, suggested that PQA and SWAP be combined, creating a program that would educate and certify producers in both herd health and herd welfare practices and would have third-party oversight to provide assurance that those practices have been learned and put into place.

He said both components of the health

and welfare program were revised and field tested at 93 production sites of all kinds and sizes to make sure the program met the workable and affordable requirements.

He said it then was reviewed and supported by a technical advisory committee consisting of animal behavior and science specialists Temple Grandin at Colorado State University, Ed Pajor at Purdue University and Janet Swanson at Kansas State University and Kansas veterinarian Lisa Tokash to make sure the program would be credible. The committee was "a very solid group, and our customers knew the program would be credible if (the committee) said so."

Walking and living

PQA Plus will educate all participating producers and their employees in animal health and welfare and then will assess all sites, providing three-year certification status when operations and producers are in compliance, Dorminy said. Assessors will be extension specialists, veterinarians and other parties, including large producers who have personnel on



Photo: National Pork Promotion & Research Board.

GOOD PRACTICES COMBINED: Pork producers have revised and combined their herd health and herd welfare programs into one rigorous program called "PQA Plus." It includes 10 good production practices that are illustrated in this PQA Plus staircase.

their staffs who can be trained to do self-assessments, he said.

Additionally, a "substantial" number of sites will be audited by independent, third-party sources, he said, explaining that the audits will be done not to check up on an individual producer but to evaluate the extent to which the program is succeeding.

He said the Pork Board, which manages the national pork checkoff, has decided to fund the audits with checkoff funds, although that decision must still be submitted to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for approval.

PQA Plus will be a rigorous test that must involve precise, quality management, Dorminy said, as delegates were given their copies of the 128-page PQA Plus manual. "This can't be a 'smoke-and-mirrors' program. ... Nothing will pass because it's 'close enough.'"

"We have to walk the talk. We have to live it."

Dorminy, who had managed the hog operations of Cargill Inc. until his recent retirement, said PQA Plus will demonstrate producers' dedication to doing the right thing for their herds and consumers "to assure consumers" of high-quality, safe pork and high-quality animal care.

Paraphrasing the PQA Plus mission statement, he said "it's our responsibility. Let's make it our promise."

In a lead-by-example move, delegates

Here's the point

AMERICAN livestock and poultry producers using modern production tools produce the most abundant, affordable and safe food supply in the world with a commitment to the care and welfare of their animals and the sustainability of the environment.

Doing so requires a commitment and management that's considerably different than that involved in other parts of commerce and industry. After all, livestock and poultry producers — and also their equipment, health and nutrition suppliers — are responsible for living creatures and for the food that nourishes people, as well as for the quality of land, water and air.

A clear example of this is the "PQA Plus" program in the pork sector. It combines science-based guidelines for using animal health products for not only the animal's health but for pork safety and wholesomeness and science-based guidelines for the care and welfare of their animals.

PQA Plus requires a producer to study a 128-page manual and make sure employees also understand their animal health and welfare responsibilities. PQA Plus requires a producer to undergo an independent assessment to determine if he or she has the guidelines and practices in the program in place and working.

It's an exacting program. As one producer leader said: "Being close is not enough."

That today's livestock and poultry producers go to such an extent to be ethical in the care of their animals and the environment and to be responsible in the production of food is a message that they and their suppliers, processors and restaurant and supermarket personnel need to share with consumers, and they can do so by referring consumers to www.feedstuffsfoodlink.com.

to the forum signed a commitment to become certified in PQA Plus by the summer of 2008.

The forum houses the annual business

meetings of the Pork Act and NPPC, with Pork Act delegates establishing policy for the Pork Board and NPPC delegates establishing policy for the pork council.