

Cattle ID: Reaching For An Age Verified Market

Until the New York State veal debacle, the Japanese had reopened the market to beef from cattle less than 21 months of age. The industry is hopeful that the necessary assurances can be made to encourage the rapid reopening of that market. Since providing age verification does require some advance planning, this is a prime time to discuss what is needed.



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The first thing that producers need to understand about qualifying calves for export to Japan is that except for a very few large operations, they will need to work with a company that already has an approved program in place. USDA uses a Quality System Assessment Program (QSA) to provide an auditable trail that documents the requirements for a specific export market, such as the age requirement for Japan.

The process of establishing a QSA requires several months of planning and development and thousands of dollars. The owner of the QSA can expect to be audited by USDA two times per year. The types of companies that currently have USDA approved QSAs are packers, feedlots and independent companies. For a current listing see <http://www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/arc/qsap.htm>. Requirements of each QSA are different. If a producer supplies cattle to more than one QSA (i.e. sells to two packers), separate records would be needed for each.

Process verified programs (PVP) that include age as a claim can also be used to meet requirements for export markets. Process verified programs were initially developed to substantiate more extensive product claims such as entire management systems or health programs. Not all PVPs include age as a part of the program. A listing of currently approved PVP is at: <http://processverified.usda.gov/>.

Producers that want to market their calves through an auction market should look for an auction that has its own QSA or independent compa-

nies that provide QSAs or PVPs and include program compliant ear tags. These are one time use, tamper-evident tags which contain a non-repeatable, unique number. The tag must be unique and specific to the program.

It may be an EID, RFID or a visual tag. As with other value added marketing efforts, sufficient age verified calves would need to be present at a given auction to draw competitive buyers.

Some common generalities can be made about record keeping for age verification, regardless of the specific QSA or PVP program. Where individual birth dates are not recorded, documenting the beginning and end of the calving season is sufficient. In this case the entire group of calves would be aged based on the oldest calf in the group. Additional documentation is needed to support your claim of age on the calves such as bull turn out date, AI records, or vaccination records.

A written management plan that describes your standard operating procedures is also needed. This would support the timing of the calving season, when calves are typically marketed, and number of calves available for sale. Who records the calving information and where the records are kept are examples of other types of information that must be documented in the process. Again, each system is slightly different so you must be trained and approved in a given system before expecting to market any calves as age verified.

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some time being "trained" for the requirements of which ever program they choose. The procedures are not that difficult but it will be very important to follow the details closely. The owner of a QSA will need to audit 10% (or other specified number) of its suppliers each year and USDA's twice yearly audits could go back to cow / calf producers.

Is this record keeping worth the effort? Initial reports of premiums paid at harvest for age verified cattle were in the range of \$25-\$35 per head. Demand for certain variety meats such as tongue was greatly reduced when export markets were cut off in December 2003. Since then some variety meats have just gone into rendering. An estimated 50% of US beef tongues harvested went to the Japanese market in 2003 where the retail value of tongue is considerably greater than in the US. However, in its short time open, the market had yet to establish how any premiums may be shared along the production chain.

While information concerning the Japanese market has received most press, opportunities exist for other export and domestic markets that require a QSA or PVP. Retailers have indicated they want source verification although as of yet they have not backed that up with a strong market signal. Cow / calf producers should explore options to capture additional value associated with age and source and stay up to date with these evolving market opportunities.

Born on Date

While some producers that strive for age verification individually tag calves and record a birth date for each, a majority of producers have a less defined calving season and do not routinely tag calves. For those producers that see the value of age verification but want a simpler system consider the following.

Assume the first calf born for the 2006 spring calf crop was observed by a producer on March 5th. The producer will have extra help available on the weekend of April 8th when he expects at least 50% of his calves to be born. At that point all calves will be gathered and receive the same color of dangle ear tag. The date of the first calf born is clearly noted on a calendar and the date the calves received their colored tag. At branding time and /or when it is time to move to summer grass all remaining calves will receive a tag of a different color from the first group. This creates two age groups of calves to be marketed. The same principle could be applied more frequently for larger groups of calves. If calves are to be marketed through a sale barn, each will need a program compliant tag.

Source: Sandy Johnson, livestock specialist , Dale Blasi, stocker, forage and nutrition specialist