

NPPC/AMSA Quality Audits Update

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Introduction

Pork Quality is becoming a very important issue throughout the pork industry. Quality can be defined in a number of different ways by different segments of the industry. But whatever the definition, concerns such as fresh pork color, water-holding capacity or drip loss, intramuscular fat, and palatability characteristics (tenderness, juiciness, and flavor) usually arise. Even though pork quality has been studied for decades, there are still many unknowns in this field. On the other hand, there is enough knowledge to categorically state that factors contributing to pork quality concerns are not the result of the practices in just one segment. All segments of the pork chain contribute to pork quality, good or bad.

The production segment of the pork industry can greatly affect pork quality through genetics. Breed or line selection, sire selection within line, presence of the halothane or Napole gene, and the use of new genetic selection tools are genetic factors which play a role in pork quality. Nutritional inputs can affect quality. Handling of hogs on the farm and in transport also can have significant impacts on meat quality. NPPC has several programs in place to attempt to address and correct deficiencies in these areas.

The segment responsible for slaughter and fabrication of fresh pork can have a significant impact on quality. Hog handling and rest prior to stunning, stunning procedures, evisceration procedures and times, measuring techniques, and chilling procedures can all have significant effects on subsequent product quality.

NPPC is interested in the promoting the value, quality, safety, and wholesomeness of pork to consumers. However, to accomplish this NPPC must be involved with the product throughout the pork chain. In-plant pork quality audits are one way to help the packing segment recognize and correct some of the practices that may be contributing to deterioration in meat quality. The American Meat Science Association is the legitimate body of meat science professionals to carry out these audits.

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Approach

The audits are three day evaluations usually conducted Wednesday through Friday. Wednesday is used to become familiarized with the plant and the people and to make assignments. The records, SOP's, SSOP's, and HACCP plans are usually studied at this time as well. Thursday begins with pre-op and continues through second shift if the plant has one. All the data and notes collected from observation and interview during the day are compiled and summarized late that evening. On Friday the final report is written, any last minute follow-ups are completed, and a debriefing with management is held. The audit is usually completed by Friday noon.

Auditors

The teams used in each audit are selected from a group of sixteen extension meat specialists who have been trained in audit procedures and have had an orientation in the checklist used for these pork quality audits. Lead auditors are also being trained. These individuals have been involved in at least three audits and are identified as individuals capable of leading, assigning, compiling huge amounts of data in a short time, and capturing significant problems and communicating them in sound bites to the auditee. Only the author is a Certified Quality Auditor by the American Society of Quality, but the goal is to have all auditors go through this rugged testing and certification procedure.

Auditees

The auditees for the Quality Audits are medium to large packing plants in the U.S. All of these packing companies in the country have been approached and have had an audit proposed to them. A few audits have been conducted and several more are planned. The response has been fantastic. The packers involved have been amazed at some of the things found. Most have been small, easily corrected practices. These audits are totally voluntary, so any corrective action is the prerogative of the company audited.

Checklist

The primary tool used by the auditors in conducting the quality audit is a checklist. This 75-page document guides the auditors through their data seeking and capturing mission. The checklist is based upon the body of knowledge in pork quality where available, and on the auditors experience where

no industry standard exists. The checklist is divided into segments roughly approximating the flow of pork from unloading through the barns, kill, chill, fabrication, boning, boxing, product storage, and shipping. Chemical storage, the labs, sanitation, and employee areas are also evaluated.

Database

A database of information has been developed and tested. This compilation of data is used to provide a timely response of summary tables at the conclusion of the audit. Data are input during the course of the audit and compiled and summarized for immediate reporting at the conclusion of the audit. After a critical mass of data are collected from several audits, the industry results will be communicated as a sort of ongoing national quality audit. This data will be extremely useful for individual plants or companies to compare themselves to the industry at large and to promote their product to their customers. The industry will be able to utilize the results to promote U.S. product in foreign markets as very safe and wholesome as determined by these audit results.

Confidentiality

Every auditee or potential auditee is concerned about confidentiality. Therefore, the original audit team has developed a secrecy agreement signed by all the auditors on the team ensuring their adherence to secrecy mandates by the company. In addition, only two final reports are prepared, one for the auditee and one for the database. Furthermore, a signed agreement outlining procedures protects the auditee by a most stringent approach to the handling of the database.

Cost

One of the most attractive considerations of the audit program is the cost. Due to our interest in improving quality throughout the pork chain, NPPC subsidizes the program by paying half the costs. The auditee is billed for the other half on a cost-plus basis. For planning purposes, a figure of \$12,000 is used as a total for most audits, with some costing less based on location and local hotel and meal costs.

Value

The audits have a very high value for everyone involved. The amount and level of information transmitted to the auditee is so great that every company participating can be guaranteed satisfaction. The value to the industry is high due to incremental improvement in the product. The ability to market fresh pork to domestic and international customers is increased by the fact that the industry has a centralized and coordinated program in place to evaluate and correct deficiencies in pork quality. All customers and consumers are the ultimate winners.