

Age and Source Verification - Capturing the Advantage

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Age and Source Verification has been a topic of increasing interest in the beef industry and provides an opportunity for cow-calf producers to potentially add value to their calf crops. Beef export agreements between the U.S. and trading partners require that the exported beef originate from animals meeting age requirements (less than 20 months for Japan, less than 30 months for several other countries). Therefore, beef processors are in need of a supply of cattle with age verification records. Depending on supply, the value of age verification is typically \$25 to \$45 per head at harvest. This value is received by the entity supplying the cattle to the packer which is typically the cattle feeder (or producer in case of retained ownership). Consequently, cattle feeders are often willing to pay premiums for feeder cattle which are age verified since they have the opportunity to capture this value upon selling the cattle at harvest.

Verification Programs and Their Role in Beef Exports

USDA has established two processes by which cattle birth records may be tracked through the production chain. In general, PVP programs are designed to verify cattle prior to marketing (applicable to feeder cattle sales); whereas, QSA programs define mechanism by which records are maintained and transferred within a production system (retained ownership with a known feedyard and packer).

There are several PVP programs which have been approved through USDA. Examples include those administered by beef processors (Smithfield Beef Group, PM Beef Group, Creekstone Farms), information management companies (ITS, AgInfoLink, IMI Global, etc), and breed associations (AngusSource, Red Angus Association).

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).

USDA has established Beef Export Verification (EV) Program 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 either through carcass maturity specifications (ie. A40 rule for Japan), or through product from PVP or QSA age-verified cattle.

Implications for Cow/Calf Producers

Age and Source Verification requires producer enrollment in PVP or QSA. Simply stating “source and age verified” or “home-raised” does not provide the level of documentation or verification necessary. To sell calves as Source and Age Verified, cow/calf producers will most likely be providing information to a 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 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, many 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.

What Records Do I Need to Keep?

The key items of source and age verification are 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 and enrollment process, 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 cows and calves with a unique number in your herd. Tag calves at or near birth.
2. 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 calf was born and the day the last calf was born. Be able to differentiate calves born in different calving seasons (unique tag number, color, letter code, etc.). Keep records in a safe, readily accessible location.
3. Be able to differentiate any purchased cattle (stockers) from home-raised calves. This can be done through unique ear tags and different management locations. Documentation and management must be able to clearly show which calves are born on the farm vs. those purchased with no opportunity for mis-identification.
4. Keep records of all cattle inventory, movements, re-tagging, and sales.
5. Become a BQA certified producer. Keep BQA records up to date as required. Record all vaccinations, dewormings, implanting, or health treatments.
6. Keep all records in a safe, readily accessible location for minimum of three years.

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.

Program Enrollment

Enrollment in a PVP program includes completing necessary forms and paperwork which describe the record-keeping process with focus on details of age documentation. A training session and initial audit of producer records accompanies enrollment (this may be done on-farm or via phone). Once enrolled, producers are responsible for applying a program compliant tag to each individual calf and keeping corresponding records of this ID with the calf birth date information. Corresponding tag and birth date information is provided to the PVP data manager so that this information is accessible to the purchaser of the cattle and can be passed along the production chain. Only age verification records are associated with the PVP program (producer name, address, etc. are not included nor are vaccination records, breed information or other management records).

In almost all cases, cattle that are destined for a Source and Age Verification program will need to be tagged with an RFID (electronic) ear tag. The electronic tag serves as the conduit for transfer of information for the PVP or QSA. The tag must be associated with an individual animal and its birth premise, and therefore must be applied by the cow-calf producer prior to commingling with cattle from other sources.