Introduction to the CQA® Program

Project Background

Canada's pork industry is experiencing tremendous growth in domestic and export markets as consumers discover the versatility, value and consistent quality available to them. However, as marketing opportunities increase, so does competition. Today's consumers want to be assured that the food they buy is safe, wholesome and responsibly produced.

In the past, Canada's reputation as a quality producer, along with verbal assurances, was sufficient to maintain customer trust. Today, that's not enough. Buyers want proof that the food they buy meets clearly-defined quality standards.

The Canadian Quality Assurance (CQA®) program, developed by a technical team comprised of specialists assembled by the Canadian Pork Council and supported by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, is the pork industry's commitment to consumers that pork products meet the highest food safety standards. CQA® is based on HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point), an internationally accepted food safety assurance system developed by the Pillsbury Company, originally developed to ensure that food produced for the United States' space program was uniformly safe and wholesome.

Although HACCP (pronounced ha-sip) was originally intended for use in food processing situations, the food industry now finds it useful to apply HACCP principles at each stage in the producer-to-consumer chain. The Canadian Pork Council's CQA® program is the producer component in the pork industry's commitment to total quality assurance for customers at home and around the world.

Customers, governments and the media constantly challenge food producers to assure safe, wholesome and responsibly produced food. CQA® gives hog producers the opportunity to provide that assurance on behalf of the pork industry.

The HACCP Approach

HACCP is a preventive methodology for assuring food safety, wherein potential problems or hazards are initially identified, and then subsequent steps taken to eliminate or minimize them. Prevention is a key element of HACCP. Another important component is documentation. Operations following a HACCP program indicate what they intend to do and then document their procedures to prove that they have actually been completed.

Part of any HACCP program involves ensuring that all inputs used adhere to its principles. This is the driving force that has prompted processors to ask producers for assurances at the farm level. While this is a relatively new concept for Canadian hog producers, in other countries, hog producers have been working with quality assurance programs for some time.

Putting HACCP to Work on the Farm

The CQA® Producer Manual is divided into two main sections. The first part of the manual, the On-Farm Quality Assessment Form, is designed to allow you to work through the questions on your own. It contains some questions that require only yes/no answers and others that require written explanations of what you do in your operation to address specific issues. By completing the Assessment Form, you will in fact create a quality assurance program for your operation. An accredited CQA® validator will ultimately review this

form. The answers and records you provide will determine whether or not your farm receives CQA® recognition.

Shaded sections are mandatory areas that the CQA® validator will specifically check in order to qualify your operation for CQA® program recognition.

As part of the Assessment Form, several records are required. Sections applicable to your operation must be fully completed.

The second part of the Producer Manual provides additional detail on various quality assurance issues. It contains descriptions of good production practices (GPPs) as well as an abundance of other practical information.

The Producer Manual is required reading for owners and managers. Staff members may also use it as reference when and if they need help. Should you find any sections of the Assessment Form unclear, the rest of the Producer Manual should provide clarification.

In addition to the content of the Producer Manual, all CQA® participants should be familiar with a publication produced by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada entitled *Recommended Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Farm Animals* ***Pigs.*** If you do not have a copy of this publication, we recommend that you check with your CQA® provincial delivery agency to see if they have it in stock.

A Little More About HACCP and the Assessment Form

You may notice that some of the shaded questions of the Assessment Form seem to ask for more information than others. There is a very good reason for this. When CQA® was developed, the technical team assembled by the Canadian Pork Council worked on developing a generic HACCP plan that would apply to the Canadian hog industry in general rather than to one specific farm. In the food processing industry and the Canadian packing industry, each plant has its own HACCP plan.

HACCP plans are developed by completing a series of forms and by asking and answering questions related to the production system being evaluated. Remember that HACCP stands for Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point. The first component — the hazard analysis — identifies food-safety hazards that might occur. A series of questions are asked and answered, which help to determine whether or not the hazard is beyond producer control, what Good Production Practices (GPPs) might be applied to minimize the risk of the hazard and where the hazard might be considered to be critical to the production system. If the answers to the questions indicate that a hazard can be maintained within its "critical limit" by the application of a GPP, it is important, but not "critical", in the context of HACCP. If the GPP may not control the hazard within its "critical limit", then it becomes a Critical Control Point (CCP).

The HACCP plan for CQA®, as mentioned above, was developed for the "typical" Canadian hog operation. This was done so that producers would not be required to work through the entire HACCP hazard identification and critical control point determination process. Because CQA® has taken this approach, the program is "HACCP-based" rather than a pure HACCP program.

Good Production Practices relate to pre-requisites in the CFIA FSEP program. GPPs provide the basic environmental and operating conditions necessary for the production of safe products. In other words, GPPs are the broad conditions that are in place to manage the system. The Producer Manual has GPPs broken out according to the

following category headings: Purchasing, Animal Handling, Sanitation and Building Design, Medical Supplies: Use and Storage, Feed Handling, Biosecurity, Water, Shipping, Marketing and Transport, Personnel Training and Deviation and Notification.

A critical control point is a specific point, step or procedure in the production process where control can be applied to manage a hazard, "Level B" good production practices (GPPs) control the identified hazard (within acceptable limits) at any point in production.

The generic CQA® HACCP plan has three critical control points and fourteen "level B" GPPs. They include procedures known as either Monitoring, Deviation or Verification activities. Monitoring procedures are the day-to-day, routine activities conducted by staff members, which ensure that a protocol is being followed. Deviation procedures are the steps followed when something goes wrong. Verification procedures are carried out by someone other than the person responsible for the day-to-day procedures and monitoring in question, and are conducted periodically to ensure that monitoring and deviation procedures are being carried out correctly.

When developing the CQA® On-Farm Quality Assessment Form (based on identified hazards) it was necessary to compile questions that would assist producers in recording and/or creating their own production protocols, determining how they would monitor procedures and detailing what, if any, deviation procedures might be required.

In some cases, protocols and monitoring procedures can be documented by fully answering a single question. For example, in the question about avoiding injection site abscesses, writing the answer requires that you provide a description of the way in which injections are given in order to minimize the risk of creating abscesses. As well, a component of abscess control is daily monitoring of animals for visible signs. Therefore, if an existing abscess is found and treated, any treatment and deviation will be recorded since the treatment record requires documentation of the reasons why the treatment was used.

In other cases, specific questions about monitoring and deviation will be asked. Monitoring questions and the answers you provide form part of your protocol. They describe what records you keep and how they are reviewed to capture any problems that might arise. Deviation questions ask what you would do should something go wrong. In other words, monitoring and deviation questions enable you to develop a plan of action that can be followed to avoid mistakes in the future.

Verification is addressed by questions and answers that detail how you ensure that protocols are followed. Verification is an additional step that ensures your protocols are working and that they are conducted by someone other than the person who completes the day-to-day tasks. Producers are strongly encouraged to ask their herd veterinarian (if that person is different from the CQA® validator), feed or equipment salespeople/technicians and family and staff members to verify procedures and records from time to time. In the event that none of these individuals are available, it is acceptable for the CQA® validator to conduct verification activities. However, the verifier must have access to the written protocols, monitoring procedures and deviation procedures. Armed with this information, the verifier can review records and ask additional questions which will help him/her confirm whether tasks are being conducted as per the written protocol. If you have someone available to verify your protocols other than your CQA®

validator, consider making verification a standard part of your protocol.

Shaded questions that are not considered to be critical control points or "level B" GPPs are still deemed "important" for food safety related concerns under CQA®. Although they do not ask for the same amount of detail as critical control points remember that any protocols you write for these particular questions will be used by your staff and their replacements as protocols for getting the job done right. Any additional clarification you can provide here will reduce unnecessary staff enquiries. Knowing that they are following procedures correctly will also increase staff confidence.

Non-shaded questions relate to food safety concerns, but are not requirements for CQA® recognition. For example, some tools used in pig processing can spread bacteria, which may have food safety consequences, or which may result in an abscess, should the bacteria cause an infection. With proper handling, such hazards can easily be controlled.

With that, begin reviewing and completing your Assessment Form to write protocols for your operation. Notes have been included with the questions to assist you in answering. As well, references to applicable Producer Manual sections are provided.