



Department of Agricultural Economics
Kansas State University

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Topics of Consideration for Process Verification

*by Renee Sanden, former extension assistant, Kansas State University
Lori Thielen, extension assistant, Department of Agricultural Economics,
Kansas State University, and
Michael Boland, Associate Professor, Agricultural Economics, Kansas State University
mboland@agecon.ksu.edu¹*

Process Verification is not likely for every group and achieving process verification is not as easy as it may seem. There are some issues to consider when undertaking process verification. Most producers do not market all their animals through one program and it is likely that most producers will not market all of their animals through a process verified system.

Paperwork

Depending on how a quality manual is written and set up, becoming process verified can considerably increase the amount of paperwork a producer needs to complete. At the same time, quality manuals can be simplified and paperwork consolidated to make the extra work as easy and quick as possible. Furthermore, some producers consider the added paperwork as valuable records that can be used to enhance the production on their operations. Just keep in mind that with process verification, producers should be prepared to spend more time on paperwork and record-keeping than without process verification.

Production Practices

When participating in a process verified program, one must follow the practices outline in the process verified quality manual in order to fulfill their obligations. Sometimes these requirements (such as banning the use of growth implants or ionophores) may increase production costs for the producers. It is important to make sure a producer is willing to follow these production practices at all times, especially since the USDA will audit groups once per year. Just as the proverbial one bad apple that spoils the lot, if one person in a group is not upholding the integrity of the program, the entire group will not be process verified for that year.

¹ Renee Sanden is a former extension assistant at Kansas State University and is currently a nutritionist for Sweetlix, a livestock nutrition supplement company, in Salt Lake City. Lori Thielen is an extension assistant and Michael Boland is an associate professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Kansas State University. Questions or comments may be e-mailed to lolen@agecon.ksu.edu or mboland@agecon.ksu.edu.

Lack of Economic Incentives

Currently, there is no proof of economic incentives for products simply because they are process verified. The process verified points need to be valid points that *matter* to the customer or ultimate consumer so much, that they are willing to pay increased amounts for these products over the competition. Process verification alone does not guarantee these economic incentives.

Cost to Implement

When becoming process verified there are basically three different costs: development, implementation and auditing costs. The development of a process verified system can be very expensive if you decide to have a consultant write the quality manual. If a group decides to do the quality manual on their own, it can be expensive in terms of a time commitment. Get quotes from a consultant that has expertise in this subject to determine the cost of having a manual written for your group. Also check with the USDA on seminars that are available on writing process verification manuals.

Implementation of a process verification program can be as simple or as difficult as the quality manual allows it to be. A simply written quality manual that utilizes production practices and record keeping already in place, will be very simple to implement. A more complicated quality manual with new or difficult production practices and lots of new paperwork can be more difficult to implement. If a group is able to pay someone to implement the program and the producers are willing to make it work, the costs should stay relatively low for implementation. Audits can become expensive as they need to occur each year. Cost of the initial audit for the group that K-State Research and Extension worked with was \$5,000. This number may increase or decrease depending on the length of time it takes for the USDA to audit your program. Contact the USDA for more details on the cost of audits.

Audits

When most people hear the word audit, they immediately get nervous. Process verification audits can be stressful because the time, effort and money put forth to develop the program is at stake. At the same time, if a group does not pass an audit, there are no fines or other sorts of punishments. You simply cannot place the process verification label on your products. In fact, very few groups pass the first audit and so a group should not get too anxious if the results of their first audit result in non-approval. After any audit however, a group will receive comments and suggestions on what needs to be improved in their program in order to become process verified. These can be used by a group to improve the quality of their process verification system and ultimately in the end to become approved for process verification.

Group Size

Any size group can become process verified from one producer to an entire group of producers. Only one quality manual must be written per group that is to become process verified. Larger groups are able to spread costs over more members as audits are charged on a per manual/program basis. At the same time, it is more difficult to write a quality manual that is agreeable to larger groups of people. For large groups, consider having representatives on a board that assist in development of the process verification manual. In this way, the needs and concerns of most members of the group will be addressed.