

Leading by example

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While processors, producers and legislators in the U.S. haggle over country of origin labeling, Maple Leaf Foods, Toronto, is letting technology do the talking. Maple Leaf is developing a program that will make it possible to trace any piece of pork from the retail case back to the sow on the farm. One might ask: How is pork tracked through the cut floor and packaging room? Since the program will be based on D.N.A. testing, no attempt has to be made to track meat through the conveyors on the cut floor.

According to a recent article in National Hog Farmer, innovations in D.N.A. testing and storage of D.N.A. codes on a database will be the heart of the system. The system will also be producer-friendly. When a new sow is added to the herd the producer takes a blood or hair sample and sends it to the lab along with the animal's farm of origin information. To keep everyone honest, pork would be randomly sampled to ensure producers are sending the correct sample.

The beauty of this system is any piece of Maple Leaf bacon or loin can be traced. Even if the package is lost the computer will be able to find a match. Currently, the technology costs about \$35 per sow, but like most technologies, the cost is rapidly decreasing. Soon, that cost is expected to be \$10, or about 50 cents per market hog, because only the mother has to be typed and have her D.N.A. stored on the computer.

Exporting countries are progressive

Canadian meat companies are motivated to be progressive because their pork industry depends on exports. According to Michael Rowe, vice president of Maple Leaf, Canada exports 44 percent of its total pork products while the U.S. exports only 8 percent of its pork. Rowe addressed the Saskatchewan Pork Industry Symposium this past year and informed producers that Canada has 21 percent of the world pork export market.

Throughout my career I have observed that the most progressive meat companies are the ones that do a lot of exporting. Exporting companies have to do what the customer wants. Some of the best plants I have visited have been in the exporting countries of New Zealand, Australia and Denmark.

The Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan are leaders in animal welfare on the farm. In both provinces most new sow housing is group housing. The Hutterite colonies have been really progressive. They visited many systems in Europe to find the best designs. A builder at the Saskatchewan meeting showed his latest group of house systems.

In both Alberta and Saskatchewan, universities have developed a Swine Interpretive Center to educate the public about the pork industry. I visited the facility at the Univ. of Alberta. It has museum-type displays to show school children how pigs are raised. There are also windows where visitors can look into a real farm. The sows are in an experimental group housing system and the sows and piglets are in regular farrowing stalls. Colorful exhibits present fun facts and diagrams, and pictures show exactly what large hog farms look like.

While the U.S. has recently banned the use of downer cattle in the food supply, Alberta's livestock industry has a longstanding, progressive stand on non-ambulatory cattle. The Alberta beef, dairy and pork Industries have agreed to take a tough stand against shipping downer cattle. Good managers know that most downers can be prevented. The eastern Canadian industry in Ontario and Quebec should follow the lead of its western counterparts. The Eastern producers are fighting for the right to ship downers.

Animal welfare in slaughter plants is one area where the U.S. is still ahead of the Canadians. Auditing of the plants by many restaurants and the new U.S. Dept. of Agriculture animal welfare veterinarians have made great improvements. Audits I conducted this past June indicated that some plants in Canada had some serious problems. Most of the problems were in the eastern provinces and in two plants serious animal abuse occurred during the audit.

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