

# Is Ontario's Veal Safe? Prove It!

Veal Farmers of Ontario (VFO) held their inaugural Annual General Meeting and Producer Education Day on March 9th in Tavistock, Ontario, where they hosted a panel discussion about the Verified Veal Program (VVP), Canada's on-farm food safety program for veal production. The panel included Jorge Correa, from the Canadian Meat Council, Bob Wynands, president of the Canadian Veal Association, and Brian Keunen, 2015 chair of VFO.

Wynands explained how some veal producers in Quebec have voluntarily adopted the VVP and that they are considering making some aspects of the program mandatory for all producers. Both Wynands and Correa emphasized the value of an on-farm food safety program, explaining that consumers already think that all Canadian veal producers are participating – and that they would be shocked to hear not all veal producers across Canada are. Not adopting a mandatory on-farm food safety program puts veal producers behind other commodities like pork and chicken. Now, more than ever, consumers are asking “How was this food produced... is it safe?” said Wynands. Correa explained that the VVP will provide the answer to those questions. He added that consumers want to see transparency about on-farm practices, “The only way to show transparency is records – we need to keep records.” Correa noted that the reason Canada can export meat to markets around the world is because of on-farm food safety programs. Export markets are a key way we can grow the Ontario veal industry, and many importers want to see evidence that on-farm food safety is a high priority. VVP is the key to being able to export Canadian veal to emerging and expanding international markets.

Keunen expressed concern about the competitiveness of the Ontario veal industry if it was not meeting the same standards as veal from Quebec. “Rest assured that packers in Quebec will be flaunting [VVP] to suppliers,” he said. Wynands then noted that the federal packing plants in Quebec are taking note of the program, and believes they will soon require all producers shipping to federally licensed plants to participate in the Verified Veal Program. In regards to both Ontario and Quebec producers, he remarked “I'd rather see producers pick it up,” than be forced into it. About this, Wynands stated, “[VVP] is in the best interests of veal producers throughout the country. Quebec doesn't want to have a competitive advantage... we all produce veal and we represent the industry together.”

VFO asked Marcello Capoferri, from Ryding Regancy to further elaborate on the packer perspective. He said, “The W5 program really put a damper on the Canadian meat market and the public's attitude towards the packer and the retailer. So, the retailer has no choice but to put the pressure on the packer to source humanely raised, antibiotic free veal. The packer then has to put the pressure on the producer.” He noted that this pressure was from consumers and retailers all over Canada, as well as internationally. “The only way to appease the packer, the retailer, the media, and ultimately the consumer is promoting the Verified Veal Program.” Further, he emphasized that, “[VVP] will help Ontario's veal industry and make us a player in the veal industry in Canada and worldwide.” Capoferri sees the VVP as essential to helping producers raise a safer, more consistent product that enhances public trust in the Ontario veal industry. “The verified program is the only way to go. The chain stores will be knocking on our doors soon and if we are not ready and willing to participate, they will exercise their options.”

While there are no direct financial incentives to encourage producers to participate, Wynands noted, “It's your business, your livelihood – you want to protect it.” Quebec has even added additional components to the program that cover animal husbandry. This provides producers with the information needed to ensure veal is produced both safely and humanely. He then told the audience about a case where the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) found a drug violation in a veal carcass during routine testing, and paid a visit to the producer who shipped the finished veal. Due to his record-keeping, the producer could prove he did not administer the drug in question to that animal, saving himself from a potential fine.

Keunen was the first to admit that he, like many veal producers in Ontario, was originally leery of the program. He said that there is a fear that the program will bury producers in paperwork and record

keeping, reducing the time producers spend caring for their animals. Wynands explained that this was a concern in Quebec as well, but once on the program producers discovered that much of the necessary information was already being recorded, and the program simply makes the recording process slightly more formal, "It just becomes a part of the daily routine – we do all these things already," he said. Keunen was worried that the wide variety of record keeping practices on Ontario farms could pose a challenge to adopting the program, but Wynands remarked, "It seems scary, but it's so simple." He then explained that the information collected for VVP can actually help producers see the impact of their management practices and make changes to improve profitability. He added that not one producer in Quebec has dropped out since taking on the voluntary program.

Keunen noted he plans to lead the way, implementing the Verified Veal Program on his farm this year. He will begin by working with Jennifer Bullock from the Veal Farmers of Ontario office. Bullock was part of the team that created the program and is available to help producers understand and implement it on their farm. He then hopes that, once more producers adopt the program, producers can work together and support one another.

The panel agreed that most producers could easily adopt the Verified Veal Program, and the program is the best way to learn from other commodities' experiences with on-farm food safety as well as provide transparency and reassurance to Canadian and international consumers, allowing these markets to continue to grow.

To learn more about the Verified Veal Program, call the VFO office at 519 824 2942 or email [info@livestockalliance.ca](mailto:info@livestockalliance.ca) .