

Verified Beef Production Plus Program

The Verified Beef Production Plus (VBP+) program experienced a great deal of growth in the 2020 year, pandemic notwithstanding. The year was pivotal in many ways in terms of what the VBP+ program can deliver to both industry stakeholders and Canadian beef producers. Key was the launch of VBP+ Delivery Services Inc. and the development of a comprehensive audit management tool.

VBP+ Delivery Services Inc. (VBP+ Inc.) was incorporated in February of 2019, but not fully realized until late 2019. Early 2020 saw the organization start to deliver audits in the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan while beginning the transition of the Eastern provinces. VBP+ Inc. is the certification arm of the VBP+ program and the organization tasked with delivering certification to all Canadian beef producers to the VBP+ standard. VBP+, under the umbrella of the Beef Cattle Research Council, continues to provide training and pre-certification education as well as maintenance of the VBP+ standard.

Certification services offered by VBP+ Inc. were paused and slowed in March of 2020 while public health officials and governments of all levels sought to understand and provide guidance on mitigating the spread of COVID-19. VBP+ Inc. took this opportunity to begin development on a new electronic audit management system that not only allows the organization to fully meet the requirements of the accreditations and equivalencies it currently holds but is flexible enough to incorporate additional outcomes into its audit/certification process thus providing maximum value to producers through one audit/certification.

The system also provides robust key performance indicators and aggregated metrics from the audit/certifications that are performed which can be utilized in many different ways; to provide focus to producer education in key gap areas, provide validation data to drive potential research direction and/or provide grassroots data on producer practices at the operational level to support policy or governmental change recommendations. These metrics are already being regularly utilized by the VBP+ Management Committee and in the near future by the VBP+ Technical Committee to guide program change activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic also dictated that VBP+ Inc. start development and piloting of remote audit methodologies to enable the continuation of audit activities in areas where there may be public health directives in place that are limiting. There is a small team of auditors that are currently performing pilot remote audits on operations across Canada and data generated will be utilized in methodology development that can be presented for validation of the remote audit process by any stakeholder or oversight body. Different technologies for virtual auditing will also be examined and evaluated for potential utilization in different yet distinctly Canadian environments. These technologies must meet many demanding environmental and connection challenges to be effective. A positive outcome of this activity will be remote audit technologies and methodologies that can be validated and utilized in



an audit/certification cycle to support audit rigor while keeping costs down for Canadian beef producers.

VBP+ Inc., pandemic notwithstanding, had a successful year auditing operations largely in western Canada, achieving around 60 per cent of their anticipated number of audits. Following is a chart showing the head numbers of various sectors on certified operations as of December 31, 2020.

Backgrounder	233,587	+24,762 since Jan 2020
Cow/Calf	308,616	+27,214 since Jan 2020
Feedlot	999,842	+124,057 since Jan 2020

In-person training activities under VBP+ and delivered through the provinces were essentially shut down starting in March 2020 due to the pandemic. Provincial coordinators were able to shift and start to deliver workshops by webinar, but some areas are still constrained by the lack of internet connectivity. It is hoped that sometime in 2021, in-person workshops can resume for producers that prefer that mode of delivery. On-line training remained available, but again, some areas remain restrained by lack of connectivity to take advantage of online delivery.

VBP+ took the opportunity during the slowdown of training during the pandemic to accelerate efforts on the training content redevelopment activity. Ensuring that training is relevant, current and ensures producers have the information to be successful at audit/certification is a high priority and work continues to that end. It is anticipated that the new online, in-person and webinar training, as well as updated reference material will be available end of summer 2021.

Having a substantial number of producers who are invested enough in their industry to take training to improve their management practices is a metric that is of interest to some retailers. VBP+ conducted a research project in late 2019 to early 2020 to begin to assess the value that retailers and food amplifiers place on training on management practices provided by industry. The results were interesting with more to come on this topic in 2021.

Despite the obstacles placed in our path in 2020, VBP+ and VBP+ Inc. managed to make the best of a difficult situation and show progress during the year. There remains much to do, as always, but VBP+ is up for the challenge. From all indications and without additional complications, 2021 is shaping up to be a great year for the program.

