

USDA Looks to Revise Its Voluntary Pork Grade Standard

By Mike King

Recently, the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) notified the National Pork Board that it was in the process of making proposed revisions to its over 30-year-old voluntary pork-grade standard. This move, if approved after a mandatory public comment period, could provide the pork chain with the option of using a new voluntary tool to help improve overall pork quality.

AMS' current voluntary pork-grade standard has been in place since 1985 and according to Steve Larsen, assistant vice president of science and technology for the Pork Checkoff, it's no longer able to accurately assess quality attributes.

"This is especially true with the color of pork demanded by today's consumer," Larsen said. "The current standard from AMS only measures lean yield percentage, belly thickness and a combination of backfat thickness and muscle score."

Looking Ahead

Exactly how a revised voluntary AMS standard will look is not entirely known yet, but it will factor in the industry's ability to use today's technologies to more accurately measure quality-related traits.

"Checkoff-funded research has found that various technologies can be used to predict color, marbling, pH and tenderness," Larsen said.



"Adopting some of these technologies should offer the pork chain much-needed metrics to help achieve better, more consistent pork for consumers."

The National Pork Board has been involved with producer-led meat quality projects and initiatives for more than 25 years. The unchanging goal has been to create more value for all segments of the pork chain by producing a better product for consumers.

"We can certainly see the success that other meat industries have had when they used quality-related programs," Larsen said. "It helps send important signals to encourage production of higher quality products, which is what we want to do."

He added, "In the end, it's about achieving improved and consistent pork quality that creates increased demand for U.S. pork." ✓



The revision of USDA's voluntary pork-grade standard will take loin color, pH and marbling into account, which can be shown visually using pork quality tools such as this. The revised voluntary standard, subject to public comment and approval by the USDA secretary, will most likely be announced in early 2018.