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Illinois Pork Producers Help Achieve National Goal

URBANA – The National Pork Board is celebrating. They just reached their goal of certifying more than 50,000 people in the Pork Quality Assurance (PQA) Plus® program. And Illinois is one of the forefront states that helped them reach this milestone.

“It’s time we share great stories like this one,” said Rob Knox, University of Illinois Extension swine specialist. “We want to show the public how our pork producers are meeting the industry’s challenge to provide a safe, healthy food product that is raised with the utmost care.”

Three years ago, the National Pork Board unveiled PQA Plus®, a program dedicated to reflect increasing customer and consumer interest in the way food animals are raised. PQA Plus® was designed to assure the public that U.S. pork products are not only of the highest quality, but also produced safely in environments that are measured, tracked and focused on animal well-being.

“PQA Plus® gives producers another tool to demonstrate their social responsibility,” Knox said. “We want to help our customers achieve confidence in what we are doing as pork producers.”

Producers, farm workers, and anyone who handles swine are trained by a certified PQA Plus® advisor every three years to receive proper certification to sell hogs to market. Certified PQA Plus® advisors must meet specific qualifications and include veterinarians, Extension staff, and agricultural educators among others.

Every three years, people must re-certify in the PQA Plus® program and complete training with a certified advisor. It’s already time for many Illinois pork producers to re-certify, Knox said.

For individuals wanting to become PQA Plus® advisors or for those needing to re-certify, training sessions will be held on Dec. 2, March 10 and May 19 at the Illinois Pork Producers Association office in Springfield.

“We expect our advisors to adhere to strict ethical principles,” Knox said. “The industry is constantly changing and evolving to improve pork production practices. Our advisors must be extremely knowledgeable about these advancements. They serve an important role to help our industry improve and maintain its high standards.”

In 2009 alone, Illinois certified 2,569 adults, 1,933 youth, and 199 pork production farm sites. That number continues to grow, Knox said.

After producers receive PQA Plus® certification, they may obtain PQA Plus® site status for a pork production site after finishing an assessment of animal well-being practices at that production site. Producers can self-assess with an endorsement from a certified advisor or they can have an advisor complete the assessment.

While on-farm site assessments aren't required yet, Knox believes it could be required someday. Since Nov. 1, 2007, 11,632 sites have been assessed nationally through this program.

"Illinois plays a valuable role in PQA Plus® and together, we can help the industry show the country we are doing the right thing by our animals," Knox said.

For more information on upcoming advisor training and re-certification opportunities, contact Rob Knox at 217-244-5177 or rknox@illinois.edu.

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