Credible food safety assurance for the whole meat chain

Lord Lindsay

Since its launch in 1998, Assured British Meat (ABM) has been working to create a single system of credible whole-chain food safety assurance throughout the meat industry. Its remit was fully endorsed by an industry and its many millions of customers that had been beleaguered and battered by BSE, *E. coli* 0157 and other food scares. Indeed ABM’s remit was also strongly backed by a strategic coalition of external interests that went well beyond the industry and its customers, to include the Government and other public sector bodies, retailers and consumer groups.

Both bitter experience and comprehensive research showed that comprehensive, independently verified assurance had become a vital prerequisite to restoring long term confidence in the meat and livestock industry as a whole, its diverse range of operations and processes and its huge range of products. Consumers and commentators were explicit in expecting all meat products to adhere, at all stages, to core standards covering both food safety and other factors, such as animal welfare and a due regard to the environment, that determine the wholesomeness and acceptability of a product.

It was also clearly evident that core standards that demand no more than compliance with the absolute legal minimum, i.e. least practice rather than best practice, are often inadequate in restoring or retaining public confidence. Quality assurance by itself does not address general concerns about safety and wholesomeness – it needs to be underpinned by credible independent inspection.

ABM was therefore painstakingly designed to benefit the industry through delivering the crucial elements, identified by consumers themselves, as being needed to restore and secure a level of public confidence and trust.

Hence ABM’s widely backed remit to deliver a single, definitive and transparent assurance scheme with credible, intelligible, independently approved and internationally recognised core standards integrated across all sectors in the meat chain.

The ABM chain of assurance now provides food safety assurance standards independently inspected to the internationally recognised EN45011 in the following areas:

- animal feed manufacture;
- farm production of beef, lamb and pigs;
- transport of livestock;

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Abstract

The UK meat industry can now clearly demonstrate to consumers that meat and meat products can be produced to internationally-recognised and independently-monitored levels of food-safety and animal-welfare standards at all points of its production. This seamless transition of assurance, monitored by the Government-backed, independent organisation Assured British Meat, right through the meat-chain is intended to restore the public’s confidence in meat and the safety of the whole food industry.

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livestock auction markets;
abattoirs;
meat processors;
secondary wholesalers;
catering butchers; and
independent retail butchers.

Given the inherent nature of the meat industry, many doubted that such a demanding and wide-ranging undertaking could be achieved at all, let alone on a sensible timescale. However, within two years of its inception the ABM can clearly demonstrate that it has achieved the objective of whole-chain assurance. Consumers can now buy beef, lamb and pig-meat from assured farms, fed on feed from assured mills, transported by assured hauliers and sold through ABM-approved abattoirs, meat wholesalers, manufacturers, wholesale caterers and retailers.

It has required a massive commitment by the Government, the Meat and Livestock Commission and the industry itself. The demonstrable fact that comprehensive and continuous food safety assurance is being independently verified is there to provide a strategic benefit and long-term underpinning to the industry. Before long, everyone seeking a secure future in the modern agri-food industry will have to demonstrate participation in whole chain assurance.

The need to underpin through ABM assurance is not therefore the sole preserve of the consumer. Increasingly retailers, caterers, manufacturers, wholesalers, abattoirs, marts and livestock finishers are demanding that their suppliers’ source only from ABM assured businesses.

The Prime Minister’s unqualified support for British food and, more specifically, farm-assured British food was extremely welcome. Implicit in this must be an equally high profile commitment to assurance beyond the farm gate that encompasses the whole food production chain – otherwise the credibility, effort and value of farm-assurance, or assurance at any other single point in the chain, is liable to be seriously undermined.

The near disastrous effect of the BSE crisis has made it only too clear that no part of the meat industry can afford to work in isolation. Although many businesses are in fierce competition, they are all inextricably linked in the same industry. A breakdown in food safety at one point has a ripple effect emanating both up and down the chain with serious financial repercussions on other businesses.

To be successful in addressing these issues, every part of the meat chain has to work together, to ensure each business is providing the skills and services demanded by the next link and, ultimately, the consumer.

 Whilst ABM must operate on a truly independent basis, it does listen to the industries involved as sensitively as the external disciplines of its remit allow. ABM schemes must ultimately be sufficiently robust to deliver the intended confidence-building assurance; but they must also be practical and applicable in the real world.

The generally positive response to ABM from the agri-food chain and the internal industry audience has been very welcome. But more significant, is the current recognition and support for ABM from the industry’s external audiences and stakeholders.

Ultimately the greater contribution to the industry’s future derives from the ability to promote ABM’s robust, accredited and overarching assurance with consumer interests, media commentators and other opinion formers, and, critically, regulators and legislators. Hence the importance of the positive response from a number of strategic points across the public sector, including the Food Standards Agency, the Department of Health, and the DTI.

Winning tangible recognition and rewards from external bodies such as the FSA for those participating in ABM’s independently verified whole chain assurance is vital.

The ABM schemes have been developed by meat industry experts, in consultation with consumer bodies, animal welfare groups and other interested parties. These Technical Advisory Committees continue to review the schemes to ensure they are meeting the current requirements of the market, consumers and others, and to ensure that they are being applied rigorously, consistently, practically and cost-effectively. However, any recommendations must always be ratified and agreed by the independent ABM Board in line with wider strategic objectives.

In some parts of the meat chain, assurance protocols were already in place and as far as possible the Technical Advisory Committees have sought to incorporate them. The ABM/ BMMA Meat Manufacturers Scheme is an
example. For other parts of the chain, such as the livestock auction marts, it has been necessary to start from scratch. Not only has there been the need to establish the scheme protocols to ensure a seamless transition of food safety assurance from assured farm to assured abattoir – using assured transport – but it has been vital to understand how that will work in practice.

Tesco has already proffered its support for the ABM Livestock Auction Markets scheme. It has piloted a plan to source limited supplies of beef cattle from assured markets in Scotland. If successful, Tesco has said it will look to extend it in England and Wales, using the ABM scheme as an integral part of verifying food-safety assurance within the existing Tesco specification. This is a clear example of how ABM assurance is helping to open up and secure new markets, to the benefit of farmers, auctioneers, their customers and suppliers throughout the whole meat chain.

There has been some understandable frustration that progress on whole chain assurance has not been faster, voiced in particular by some of the farming groups. However, when you consider that Farm Assurance had already been in operation to varying degrees for six years or more when ABM started, then the industry really has made incredible strides to get these new schemes up and operational.

One of the key advantages of pulling all these schemes under one umbrella is that they will all be administered professionally, independently and to internationally recognised standards. Most Assured British Meat schemes operate a schedule of regular independent inspections and spot-checks of all members’ premises, to internationally recognised – EN45011 – standards and accredited by the UK Accreditation Services. All other parts of the scheme operate under the conditions required for EN45011, and are working towards its implementation. By meeting these standards and demonstrating the independent and transparent status of the ABM scheme, the aim is to reduce the duplication of time, effort and red-tape bureaucracy faced by many businesses throughout the meat industry.

The ABM standards will be rigorously upheld to maintain the integrity of the schemes for retailers and consumers. Failure to comply, in full, would result in suspension from membership. For the ABM scheme to have real consumer credibility, and ultimately value for all businesses in the meat chain, it must have teeth and be prepared to use them. By sourcing through ABM suppliers businesses know that the meat has been produced to high standards of food safety, and can be confident of passing on that assurance to their customers.