

American Wagyu Association

Objective: Review and assess the American Wagyu Association's registration process, with the goal of identifying areas for improvement in efficiency and work organization that will result in providing improved service to the members of the Association.

American Wagyu Association (AWA) Office Visit

I met the office staff including Martha Patterson, Michelle Norton and Nicole Cesmet. As an initial general statement, I was impressed with the professionalism and knowledge level exhibited by each staff member in their respective work areas. They were very open and accommodating to provide a good overview of the work flow and processes involved in conducting business with the Association.

I also visited with Executive Director Michael Beattie, who had tendered his resignation from the Association earlier in the week. We had a good discussion regarding his background, his time at AWA, and the industry position of the breed.

The following sections summarize key elements of my visit, staff interactions, breeder input, AWA strengths and suggestions for key areas where improvements may enhance office efficiencies and membership service.

Staff Observations

Martha Patterson has been involved in the AWA office for six years and has an excellent grasp of the entire operation. In my opinion, one of the challenges that was also echoed from breeder input was that Martha has been spread too thinly. Moving forward, the recent staffing additions should no doubt help alleviate some of those challenges.

Michelle Norton and Nicole Cesmet are assuming more of the daily workflow responsibilities, including the communication with breeders to answer questions and resolve issues in the registration processes. A key to improved member services is to continue to cross train each of these individuals in the various areas of the Association business so that members that do need assistance can acquire the needed information as rapidly as possible.

Access to the necessary tools and information for Michelle and Nicole will continue to be of benefit to improving customer service. Breeders tend to build relationships with these customer service representatives and the service interactions ultimately provide producers with a greater comfort level in doing business with AWA.

Association Work Flow

Incomplete registration applications arrive in the office at a higher than acceptable rate, preventing the immediate processing of the work. A proactive approach to address this problem should continue to be utilized. Upon receipt of these materials into the office by either mail or email, they are now being reviewed and phone calls or emails are made to fill in any missing information.

I did receive breeder feedback that the registration/DNA forms were complicated and too hard to fill out, but we have to remember a certain minimum amount of information is required to complete the registration of an animal. I would suggest a periodic review of the forms with a committee that includes a combination of office personnel and breeders to make improvements in the application processes. Workshops and educational sessions at breeder gatherings might be a good avenue to receive additional feedback on system improvements.

In reviewing some of the work arriving in the office, I would say there are too many files that are incomplete or have problems in how the forms are completed. In that light, I would suggest more focus is in the area of member communication and education of these processes. Even basic ranch-level identification systems and record keeping are key areas necessary for the seedstock operation. The continuous reinforcement of steps to simplify the registration procedures will pay benefits to improved efficiency with more problem-free submission of data. Keep in mind with the growth occurring in the breed, there are always new people “starting from scratch”, so do not worry about repeating the same information in newsletters or magazines. Use your communication avenues to provide information that will be beneficial to the membership.

The registration regulations that also require DNA testing be completed create some complications in the system. The combination forms submitted for the testing and registration process comprised most of the work I reviewed. There were still some breeders performing the DNA tests first, applying for the registration following the receipt of the DNA results. I sensed a perception that the registration process seemed simpler since the possible DNA issues were already resolved.

From the DNA perspective, the transition from STR to SNP technology for parent verification is ongoing and presents some challenges. Some efficiency can be gained by immediately identifying the historical parents with archived samples at GeneSeek that only have STR parentage and have them retested to generate the SNP parentage data needed for that file. Improvements can be realized with review of the incoming registration forms to proactively solve some of these issues on the front end of the process.

The DNA reports from GeneSeek indicating confirmation or exclusion of parentage are currently provided to the breeders. These reports are somewhat complicated for many producers, so I would consider development of a very simple email format to transmit the results to the breeder. This would potentially help trigger a quicker return response from the breeder to assist in completion of the registrations.

Concern was expressed by some on completing forms online and still being required to mail or email the completed form to the office for processing. In the future, there could be resources devoted to web and database development that could create efficiency in the data management side of the Association business. An online system could allow for electronic data validation and less handling of the data files, but it would require a substantial investment in programming and development that I do not think are practical at this time. That said, I would continue to explore the available enhancements in the currently used ABRI registry system that could ultimately provide a more streamlined approach for members and staff.

In my opinion, the current staff does an admirable job in managing the Association's business and accounting through the use of several different computer programs. The registry and membership records are maintained on the ABRI database. The DNA work is interfaced in a LIMS system at GeneSeek. Initial membership data, financial records including accounting and invoicing are performed in QuickBooks and an external credit card payment system. Other Office programs are utilized for various data management and work flow functions. Staff has done a very good job creating workable solutions using these tools to perform the required functions. As mentioned earlier, an elaborate, customized database that could mesh all these different functions into one system would be desirable, but would be a long-term, costly project to develop.

To date, there is a very workable system of tracking the work flow and having an ultimate checks and balances for the work in the office. It seems there is some bottleneck associated with the completed DNA results as they are reported. I recognize from personal experience that the communication and web interfaces with the genomic provider are undergoing improvements that hopefully will provide more consistent communication to the AWA staff when those results are available. Those improvements should help to streamline the completion of work in the AWA office. A constant review of those files awaiting results will help avoid long-term delays in completion of jobs.

In an attempt to provide the best value for the services provided, continued strides in the follow-up on work awaiting DNA results or other information should be a focus in order to return registrations to the membership in a timely fashion. Setting some goals or standards for turn-around-time on complete submissions should be considered. I was impressed that many transfers arriving in the mail the day I was there were processed, completed and back in the mail that same afternoon. Expanding that approach for exceptional service to other areas where feasible would be desirable.

A constant challenge for an organization with a limited staff performing many different jobs is to evaluate the prioritization of the work needing completion. Work load can be further complicated by seasonal demands. Work flow is determined by a first-in, first-out approach, but the breeders that are providing complete, error-free submissions should be rewarded with the timely processing of their work. Education and communication will help the members understand they are responsible for some of the burden in providing complete information for the processing.

Executive Summary

- The American Wagyu Association is an active, growing organization with a membership that is passionate about the expansion of the breed and its influence in the beef industry.
- AWA has a long-term, highly experienced Registrar with a thorough understanding of the needs of the organization. The ongoing training and experience for the recently added staff will provide a strong, service-oriented team for the benefit of the organization and membership.

Action Areas:

- Strive to cross-train the staff in all areas in order to alleviate the excessive workload or backlog within a particular area.
- Communication and education with the membership on the registration, DNA, and other Association processes should be a priority to lessen the conflicts and problems associated with work arriving at the office.
- As an expansion of the education process, commit to an ongoing review of the applications, forms and work flow with staff through committees or workshops.
- Organizations such as AWA must remain flexible and nimble in adoption of new technology and improved processes to enhance efficiency.
- Continue to evaluate the ABRI system for expanded options that may enhance the overall function of AWA current and future programs.
- Maintain communication with the genomic provider, exploring options in their login system that can streamline both the validation and reporting of the DNA work.
- Proactively order SNP parentage testing on parent animals with samples archived at GeneSeek when the registration application arrives.
- Prioritize the work flow in the office to routinely address the in-suspense items awaiting DNA or other information for completion.
- Communication of the entire registration/DNA process to the membership to provide a better understanding of the steps and associated time for completion of the work.

Completed Itinerary and Activities

April 4, 2016-- Traveled to Coeur d'Alene, ID, and met with Paul Redner, Audit Committee Chairman, President Ralph Valdez, and Treasurer Weldon Mahan to discuss the plan for the office visit the following morning.

April 5, 2016 – Arrived at the American Wagyu Association (AWA) office where I spent the day with the Association's office personnel observing the entire registration process protocol. Attended dinner with Board of Director members Ralph Valdez, Weldon Mahan, Paul Redner, Martin Andersen, and Julie Barnes.

April 6, 2016 – Return to Spokane airport with Paul Redner and Weldon Mahan with further discussion regarding the AWA future and impact areas for improvement. Completed the return to Kansas City, MO.

Respectfully submitted,

Bill Bowman