

Individual tracking system not ready for prime time

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The Dickinson Research Extension Center has been actively evaluating the many processes involved in the electronic tracking of cattle. The early prognosis is simple: The industry is not ready for the implementation of a uniform, nationally recognizable numbering system for individual animal identification as called for in the U.S. animal identification plan.

This same plan, developed by the national identification development team, also identified the need for a uniform premises identification system. The implementation of the premises allocation process and subsequent utilization of the premises number seems to be on track.

The center had excellent success in tracking cattle from premises to premises utilizing existing paper records available from individual producers and local brand inspectors in combination with sale transaction records available through commonly accepted marketing channels.

The initial trace, from the calf's birthplace premises (premises 1) to the next owner's premises (premises 2) was 99.5 percent effective. It appears the trace from premises 2 to the next ownership transfer at premises 3 will be more difficult. The primary difficulty will be commingled and re-sorted cattle.

The trace from premises 2 to premises 3 can be accomplished, but more personnel will be needed. Cattle can be traced by paper records, provided the records are accurate, legible and completely filled out. It may be very inefficient to trace cattle lots composed of multiple previous owners manually.

Once the actual assignment and utilization of premises identification numbers is complete, the tracking of cattle lots from premises to premises should be quite effective. Unfortunately, as noted earlier, premises-to-premises tracking does not and will never track individual animals.

The tracking of individual animals will require the implementation of additional technology and associated education throughout the industry. The center, through the efforts of the CalfAid team, actively is evaluating the current state of tracking equipment. The results are mixed

and only marginally successful at any point.

Two areas of concern surface immediately. The complexity of sorting through the multitude of commercial players and networks literally can bring someone to tears. The problem is magnified by the careless and casual use of the term "ISO." The common reply is "yes," we are ISO-compliant. What is ISO?

ISO stands for International Organization of Standardization. Therefore, as quoted from the ISO Web site, "ISO is able to act as a bridging organization in which a consensus can be reached on solutions that meet both the requirements of business and the broader needs of society, such as the needs of stakeholder groups like consumers and users."

The immediate challenge the CalfAid team encountered was the lack of consensus among contributing players in the electronic identification (EID) business, with no regard for the stakeholders involved. The result is the removal of ISO-compliant EID tags that meet the open standard for mass usage in the industry and replacement with EID tags that meet the needs of individual users, more commonly called a closed system.

The second challenge, given the lack of true compatibility across systems, is the lack of a defined acceptable level for transponder performance. Simply put, even if the EID tags do meet the true ISO specifications, there is no guarantee the tags can be read with any level of reliability.

At least the center is not out of work. More to come. May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0240.

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