

Manual tracking outdoes electronic tracking to date

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There seems to be a growing thought that once the appropriate database is selected, along with the mandatory placement of national electronic livestock identification tags, traceback will become a reality. One probably should not contradict that assumption because, given enough might and fortitude from appropriate agencies, eventually anything can be accomplished.

Since fall 2004, the Dickinson Research Extension Center (DREC) has been tracking more than 5,000 calves that originated in North Dakota. These calves have been dispersed slowly across the central part of the U.S. Present traceback statistics reveal that roughly a fourth of the calves have been harvested at a slaughter facility and about a fifth remain on their premises birthplace. The remaining calves are residing in various backgrounding or feedlot facilities.

Up to now, the process of traceback has been a manual people effort. The electronic database portion of the study has not been able to track the cattle from point of origin through different premises on the way to harvest. This lack of electronic tracking underscores the reality that electronic connectivity from premises to premises is nonexistent.

Zero calves have been successfully tracked electronically from birth to harvest. A total of 1,308 calves have been tracked successfully utilizing the manual, people-based system. That is not to say cattle have not been placed in electronic databases. Cattle have been entered into the larger databases; however, the willingness of all parties to enter cattle into the same database or to share data from one database to the next has not happened.

One outcome of the reluctance to share database information has been manual traceback. The cattle have been traced by utilizing the existing paperwork at local marketing entities or through the brand inspection service, when available. In theory, the databases should work, but the current data, collected through the trial project at the DREC, required cooperation and communication among producers, buyers, brand offices,

marketing agencies, feed yards and packers. Not a single animal was traced to the endpoint using electronic identification tags, readers or databases.

The saga of the electronic identification (EID) tag has been one of difficulty. The first lesson we learned was that EID tags, if they are to work, must remain in place and not be cut out. Tags on 79 percent of those calves entered into backgrounding lots and 13 percent of those calves placed into feedlots were cut out.

Our second lesson was the importance of education and compliance. Tags and readers must be compliant with the current International Standards Organizations (ISO) specifications to work effectively. In many cases, the tags were cut out because of a lack of understanding. In some cases, tags were removed because of non-standard ISO equipment.

The tags and databases do work. Current technology has provided the industry with a view of the capabilities of electronic livestock identification. Because of the need to move cattle in an organized and efficient system, the current low-frequency technology is cumbersome and not up to the speed of daily commerce.

Cattle need to move in an organized and efficient system. The current efforts within the beef business seem to be headed to the adaptation of technology that will be fully dated at the time of implementation. Not much different than a snail's pace because, by the time the industry has fully comprehended what needs to be done, too much steel, wire and cement will have been set with tremendous frustration and expenses at having to redo what currently appears to work.

Words of advice: Be careful and know what you are getting into when you sign the contract.

May you find all your NAIS-approved ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com

For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1133 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.COM on the Internet.

Calves Tracked at DREC from Birth to Slaughter

Method	Calves Tracked
Manual People System	1,308
Electronic Database	0