Data Is the Power Behind the Ear Tag

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The telephone rang yesterday morning. "Can I have some of those electronic identification tags?" the voice on the telephone asked.

The call was like many already received and more will come. "What are you going to use them for?" I asked.

"I need to put them in the calves when I sell so they will be age and source verified," the voice on the telephone responded.

I could feel a headache coming on. I couldn't help but moan for a nonmutable industry, an industry filled with old cowboy mentality that spends extraordinary amounts of energy resisting change.

A common point of discussion is, "You don't have to take all those production measures because the tag is going to be used only to record the movement of cattle." Livestock identification is not about the type of ear tag. It's about the use of data. For an ear tag to mean something, the data must be recorded.

The most difficult piece of data is the first piece of data. A known and defined database needs to be generated to hold data. The input, compilation, manipulation and storage of the data are huge. Take inventory numbers as an example. For years, the most difficult pieces of data to collect have been and still are cattle inventory numbers. Often the numbers presented are quoted as being estimates primarily because the actual numbers are not easy to get. The cattle are tagged, but that doesn't mean the count is right.

A universal and misleading comment is that a simple notation on the calendar is all that is needed. At the Dickinson Research Extension Center (DREC), a quick review of the inventory is needed to answer a simple question such as how many cows you have. The answer changes throughout the year.

The Jan. 1 inventory at the DREC showed 307 head of mature cattle, which consisted of 291 cows and 16 bulls. The end-of-June inventory showed 269 head of mature cattle: 243 cows and 26 bulls. The change in inventory can come about because of purchases, transfers, harvest, sales or death.

To enter, verify and store the data that calculates the current mature-cow inventory from Jan. 1 to June 31, 96 individual entry points on the data sheet must be entered and verified. Each inventory category needs to be entered and checked for accuracy. If nothing happened in a particular data field, the data still needs to be checked. To note no change, a zero, a blank or a null space could be entered in a data field, all resulting in a different interpretation by the computer. Again, just to fill in the inventory data for the first six months of 2005, 96 different numbers were generated.

If your wall calendar has all the appropriate spaces to generate correct counts in all categories, then perhaps a simple number can work. However, history would say that a simple number only would generate more questions than answers. Did you mean this? What about so and so? Did you count the heifer in pen 23? What about the cow you were going to take back to the neighbors?

Each question confounds the world of simplicity and strains the memory that is more selective than broad. The best solution is that producers need to keep accurate, well-understood data records that stand the test of time. The tag does not cost much, but the additional people, time and skills required is where the work is. Someone needs to do the data work and that someone needs a paycheck as well. Data is the truth and work behind the tag.

May you find all your NAIS-approved 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 BT0259.

2005 DREC Mature Cow and Bull Inventory

	January	February	March	April	May	June
Females	291	291	291	290	285	246
Males	16	16	16	16	21	21
Purchased females						
Purchased males				5		5
Transferred in females						
Transferred in males						
Butchered females						
Butchered males						
Sold females			1	5	37	3
Sold males						
Transferred out females						
Transferred out males						
Females died					2	
Males died						
End female	291	291	290	285	246	243
End male	16	16	16	21	21	26