

Animal Identification Slowly Is Becoming a Maze That Goes Nowhere

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At one time, the process of tracking cattle was simple. Cattle did not move far and any transactions that involved swapping cattle were recorded to memory. In fact, prior to the concept of crossbreeding, cattle were moved only between the same types. This was a concept that was put in place by English animal breeder Robert Bakewell during the 18th century.

Of course, there were cattle that were rogues, feral in nature, but these were considered inferior to well-bred cattle. Prominent societies were established to track cattle and record offspring and transfer title as needed.

Little did those who established the principle of heterosis and promoted the development of crossbreeding programs realize just how badly they upset the applecart. With the commingling of cattle breeds and the outpouring of commercial crossbred cattle, the need and desire to track the origin and parentage of cattle diminished. The need simply was not evident.

Today, one would need to go back to the 1960s to find that environment among cattle producers. It goes without saying that most of today's producers were not involved with cattle in the 1960s. So, we have a new mind-set by cattle producers.

For all practical purposes, producers have grown up during the past 50 years. It was a period of time that witnessed the emergence of crossbred cattle and a simultaneous increase in cattle movement across state and national borders. Perhaps that is one of the fundamental issues regarding animal identification and the utilization of that animal number to help in source and age verification.

Not only is the concept foreign to many cattle producers, but also to many involved in the numerous aspects of the cattle-producing business. As a case in point, the current operating mode is not only getting more confusing to producers, but the crisscrossing of demands from within the industry is adding a tremendous burden.

The bottom line is that cattle potentially are source- and age-verified if there is some form of functional calving notation in the producer's records. Those calving

notes include some form of identification of an address or physical location. The only process required to complete the job is to place a unique ear tag in the calf at birth or prior to shipping and submit the documentation to an appropriate USDA program that provides verification.

Such a simple thought. However, in the industry, it has become a quagmire of tentacles that are overlapping, with a total failure to communicate. It is sad that there are cattle that are source- and age-verified and available to the market, but are turned away as the marketing chain places more and more certification requirements to offset perceived failures when cattle products reach their end market.

As each market end point develops its own voluntary program, the structure bottlenecks marketing the calves the way calves traditionally have been sold. The additional requirements of certification and recertification through specific Quality System Assessment (QSA) programs add more layers on top of layers, but, of course, all are voluntary.

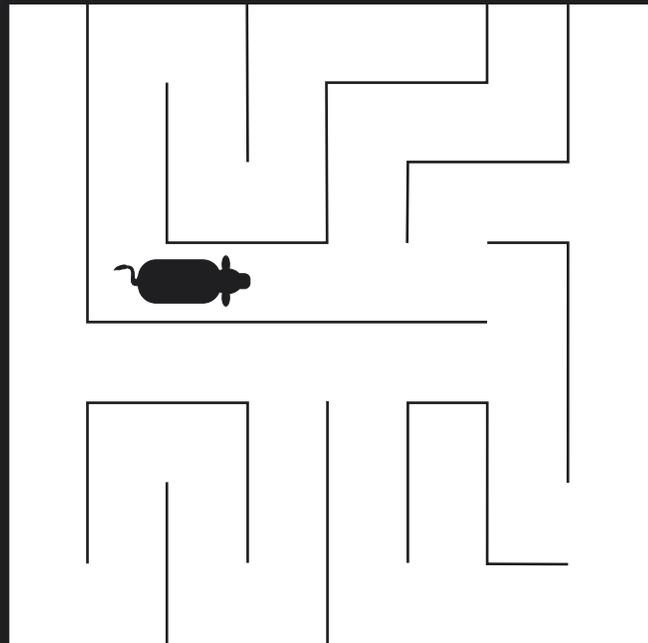
There is one little surprise. Producers who are responsible for the conception, development, birth and rearing of calves are becoming more and more frustrated when they have a calving book and are record savvy, but are denied entrance to the age- and source-verified programs due to lack of compliance.

There is a common question that crosses our desk. What are producers who have their cattle source- and age-verified through a USDA process verified program or QSA supposed to do when the marketing chain places more requirements on them to the point that it causes marketing disconnect?

There appears to be considerable structure entering the marketplace, but the structure actually limits the breadth of marketing opportunities for producers.

Today, Bakewell is still right when he said "like begets like." However, he would have a hard time proving it. I think he would have gotten lost in the paperwork.

ANIMAL IDENTIFICATION



A Maze With No End