

BeefTalk 504: New Things Are Happening, So Stay Tuned

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Is the subject of animal identification still relevant? The thought behind the comment was the news that the U.S. Department of Agriculture was not going to pursue an animal identification system.

That is a very good question from the haze of the debate over animal identification. Sometimes, the basic reasons why the debate was initiated are lost. The point remains that, regardless of the reason, cattle are not always very easy to tell apart. Therefore, the concept of an ear tag, ear notching, brand or some other distinguishing mark has been around for a long time.

Throughout the centuries of working domesticated cattle, the archives are full of people who have contested the ownership of a certain set of cattle. Historically, these would be neighbors or people in proximity to each other trying to keep their herds straight. With the exception of cattle rustlers, the process would be sincere and well-intended.

Not until recent times has the cattle business been asked to account for comingled lots of cattle. These are cattle not comingled among neighbors, but literally among people living in different countries. That is a change. Regardless of how one feels about identification processes, there is a real need to keep track of cattle as they are shifted or moved throughout the industry.

I am reminded of the meaning of a handshake in the beef business. A handshake means thank you or good luck (or many other unspoken greetings) and serves to consummate communication that seals the deal.

Again, historically, the business side of the beef business has been fairly simple. The paperwork is not excessive. Excellent sales personnel listen, note the situation and close the deal, not with a pen, but with a gavel, a nod and a twitch of the forefinger. The freshly sold calves or cows are repenned, loaded and hauled the length of the highway with the ink still in the pen. The industry demands the trusting nod and a producer's handshake.

However, times have changed and so have expectations in the beef industry. Those standard-looking cattle are now cookie-cutter images of lots of cattle. Trying to eyeball a set of previously owned cattle among a sea of predominately black or red cattle is impossible. We often ponder why all the black cattle, but black is a dominant color in cattle, and once the black gene is introduced into a line of cattle, the uniqueness of color disappears fast.

The other color that travels with the black gene is red. Although genetically recessive to black, if selected for, establishing the red color is fairly simple. Essentially, the second base color for cattle is red and once bred into a herd, the cattle will be red. With the exception of a few marking, dilutor or modifying genes, it is impossible to produce very unique-looking cattle that are one of a kind.

With that in mind, we tag, brand or mark the cattle. To make matters even more difficult, we pride ourselves on uniform lots of cattle. In the ideal world, they should all look alike, but that is where the problem lies. All those cattle that have the same phenotype may have radically different genotypes. To make matters more difficult, the consumer is asking for some level of assurance that what is offered for sale not only has the traits we easily can see, such as color, but also has an established level of acceptance for traits that cannot be seen.

For instance, eating quality, palatability and perhaps a little production history may be asked for as the cattle are sold. To ratchet things up a bit more, the question is increasingly not about program or industry standards, but about the individual animal. That is where the challenge begins.

Most days, it's just the producer "choring" the cows just like the cows have always been "chored" and probably always will be as long as cows are cows. Producers get to know the cattle and the cattle get to know the producer. This creates a feeling of good sense that is at the heart of every talented cattle producer.

But the challenge remains. How does one communicate that "good sense" to an ever widening consumer base that is no longer local, but literally worldwide, and do it with the twitch of the finger and pounding on the gavel?

Yes, animal identification is very relevant. New things are happening, so stay tuned.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

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