

## Tagging and Tracking Cows is not as Simple as it Sounds

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Just how old is that cow and where was she born? Not long ago, that question would only be asked occasionally. There is not a simple answer to such a simple question. And sometimes there is not an answer at all.

Historically, keeping track of individual cattle did not always have a high priority among producers. In fact, tags may actually be removed in situations where cattle are commingled from several sources to accommodate additional tags or tracking devices. Grab your ear and ask how many holes might you put into it before it is full. As comical as that sounds, that is a real problem with cows. The ears of the cattle at the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center cattle are literally running out of room.

At birth, calves receive a stainless steel, pre-numbered tag, a plastic tag and button. The ear holds up well until severe cold hits. Then the metal tags and buttons conduct cold, causing the ear to freeze. As the ear thaws, the end of the ear will sometimes slough off resulting in a lost tag and a calf with no identification.

The first work session for the calves entails retagging and eventually pairing the calves with the right mother. During that session, patience can run short. Those keeping records are insisting on accuracy and those working the calves, knee deep in the day's work experience while Mother Nature nips at every inch of exposed skin, are just happy to get the calf back out to the herd. On those days, comments on how simple cattle identification is, are not appreciated.

This past year, the late chilliness of March didn't help the situation. Of the calves from the 114 first-calf heifers, 18 calves lost their ear tags. Of calves from the 100 older cows that calved in early March, 13 calves lost their ear tags, and of calves from the 159 cows that calved later in March and April, 13 calves lost their ear tags.

The common question is "What ear tag are you using, so I don't use that one again?" Rest assured, our ear tagging protocols are second to none, and more than 12 percent of our calves lost tags.

The true expense of individual identification is not in

the initial tag, but in keeping the tag in the ear and placing the tag in the correct position, which is a real challenge when one considers individual source verification.

Currently our cows carry three tags per ear: one stainless steel pre-numbered tag, one plastic individual number for rapid visual identification, one electronic identification (EID), one metal bangs tag in the right ear, and two fly tags during the fly season.

Placement gets more complicated. The Bangs vaccination also results in a permanent tattoo on the right ear. If the cattle are to be registered or have an individual identification number tattooed in the left, those areas are not available for tagging because the application of the tag may damage the tattoo, making the tattoo unreadable.

We place fly tags on the back of the ear to increase body contact and the plastic individual numbered tag in the front of the ear for easier reading. The placement of the EID seems simple until you expect to read the tag.

Our experience using EID tags would indicate the tag should be kept at least three inches away from any conflicting metal tags for effective tag reading. The position of choice would be on top, with the EID inside the ear and button on the backside of the ear. Generally, the placement is 2 to 3 inches away from the head.

Ear tagging is somewhat complex--and I have not discussed placement of implant growth or reproductive devices in the ear.

So where did the cow come from? Perhaps traceable, but if the cow is like any other cow, you will need to ask her to be sure.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at [www.BeefTalk.com](http://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](http://www.CHAPS2000.com) on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0145.

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# Calf Tag Loss

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Number of cows	373
Number of calves	373
Number of calves losing tags	45
Percentage calves losing original source verification tags	12 %