

The Ever Changing Cost of Putting in a \$2 Ear Tag

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The cost of technology is always a challenge to any business. The beef business is no exception.

The buzz words in the livestock industry today, electronic identification, are creating challenges. Bigger hurdles are the breakdowns that can render electronic technology undeliverable.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center first responder team is weighing, processing and ear tagging calves. The training is vital so we are prepared for potential problems in the field. Practice, as they say, makes perfect.

The first outing was uneventful until some one asked, "Do you smell smoke?" There were nods of agreement, but quick response was still not fast enough to avoid motor damage.

There was no fire, but the electric motor burned out. The normally fast-moving hydraulic chute was no longer functional, no more fitting than the old threshing machines ceremoniously gathered on top of the butte. The event served as a reminder that current cow crews not only need people with good cow sense, but electronic sense as well.

In this case the setup was fine, but there was not enough power to start the electric motor. The generator was turned down (human error) resulting in mechanical failure and lost time. A full day's work was scheduled, so the crew did not need the setback. A tractor was brought in to run the hydraulics and the day was extended several hours.

In cattle country, today can change at a moment's notice and tomorrow may be no better. Temperatures are predicted to be in the high 90s tomorrow afternoon, too hot to do much cattle work, so the call goes out to start early.

The crew hasn't even returned from the current day's work when the cell phone rings to move tomorrow's shift up a few hours to avoid the afternoon heat. The cows and calves are happy; the crew is a bit stoic. The third workday on the road could bring a lighter schedule, perhaps we can be back home before dark.

Today the crew counts all their fingers, just glad they

are all there. Earlier in the day, with four calves to work, the tag slicer sent one member to the emergency room for a professional evaluation. The local first aid kit was not enough.

Yes, today was another day. As is so often the case, the chute side workday is hard to describe to those who have never been there. The current opinions on the relative ease of implementing a systemwide tracking process for beef cattle, from the ranch to the rail, only makes it seem more distant than near as each day rolls by.

I have often pondered the sight of old threshing machines gathered at various points of interest on the prairies. They are often positioned so they look as if they are communicating with each other, almost mocking some of the high-speed technology that flies by their permanent locations. True, they represent the past, but a past that perhaps hasn't changed as much as one might think. The blacksmith probably made most of the parts and, with a little lubrication, most of the parts still work.

For us, the new bag carries the Trac II Electronic ID reader kit, which includes a wand-base station battery and charger. The kit costs \$1,400. The power station to make sure the scale and computing equipment can pick up the reader signal is around \$4,000. The maiden power station was the reason the motor burned up. The bill for the motor is yet to be determined, although I could check the files and see what it cost us last fall when a loaner generator did the same thing.

The bottom line, the calves did receive their \$2 ear tag and the tags were read. A novice might ask what the big deal is and ask the question: Can it you put a \$2 ear tag in?

May you find all your USAIP 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 BT0211.

Costs of a \$2 Electronic Ear Tag

Trac II Electronic ID Reader Kit	\$1,400
Power Station	\$4,000
Electronic Scale Head	\$3,500