

Ear tags ñ The key to the future, don't throw away the key

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



“What, you cut out the electronic ear tag! Why?”

The producer shrugged his shoulders and responded without emotion: “I didn’t know that was what that button was. I thought it was just a broken or extra tag.”

This is a live scenario that took place in recent months. This kind of exchange amplifies the reality that sometimes change is rapid. Those who adapt to a newer or revised technology can forget easily that the rest of the industry may not fully understand the concepts involved. Several examples come to mind.

I recall an instance when a speaker was fully engaged in discussing yield grades and factors that determine the final yield grade. The longer the presentation went on, the more enthusiastic the speaker became while explaining the numerical properties of the yield grade formula and various managerial opportunities to influence the final yield. One producer leaned over to me and asked; “What is yield grade?” The presenter had missed the mark since the presentation skipped the basic concept.

Similar experiences occur in computer training. The presenter loads the computer program, does a few quick key strokes and announces the presentation is ready to begin. Unfortunately, the false assumption is that everyone knew how to turn the computer on and load the program, and had embedded into permanent memory those initial key strokes. The end result is simple: a smiling audience, great coffee and donuts, but little successful implementation of the program when the producer gets home.

The previous lessons need to be learned with individual cattle identification. It is a mistake to assume all producers understand electronic ear tags.

Removing extra ear tags is a common practice in buying and selling cattle. If the tag has no purpose to the new owner, the ear tag usually is removed to make room for a tag with meaning or simply to bring a unified look to the pen of cattle.

Ear tags are not as straightforward as they seem. Several types are available. The more visible hanging plastic tag is well-known, but a given calf can have many tags.

The visual identification number is generally on one or more hanging plastic tags.

One or two color-coded tags could be present for easy sorting when the cattle are worked. The sale barn may add a tag or two to group the cattle into lots. A breed association may have separate individual plastic or steel registration tags, as well as promotional data-type plastic tags. Health officials may have added tags for trace-back purposes. Even last summer’s fly tags still may be on the calves.

Is there room for electronic ear tags? That’s a good question. If there is room, which tag is the actual electronic tag? And so the dilemma continues. Which tags stay or go?

For appropriate trace-back, no tags ever should be removed from a calf without full knowledge of what the tag means. Prior to removal, each tag should be read to determine the purpose of the tag. Steel tags should not be removed. If they are federal health tags, they can’t be removed. Any tag, plastic or steel, that carries a recorded individual ID should not be removed.

And finally, the electronic identification tag (EID) should not be removed. The EID is generally a button or some other small tag coated in plastic and may or may not have any printing on it. This is all easily said, but hard to do because most receiving barns have more tags on the floor or in a bucket than on the calves.

The industry is in a state of change. Up-front explanation and focus are necessary. The ear tag is the key to the data.

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 BT0234.

Key to the Future

