

Calf source verification must happen at the source

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Get your tags ready for application. Another fall is here and the chores of preparing calves for weaning need to be done.

One may ask why that is news because we have been weaning calves for years. Yet, there are some changes on the horizon that are important to include in any beef management protocol. In previous BeefTalk columns, the discussion has covered accounts or opinions about calf identification using electronic tags. The net outcome of the tagging efforts is to provide source and age verification of the calves.

The tag is the heart of a multitude of efforts for good beef management. Electronic identification (EID) of calves is a big topic of discussion. EIDs provide an entry point for producers to connect within a changing industry. Now is the time for action because the 2005 calf crop is ready to be marketed. The need to thoroughly evaluate the various options and take action is imminent. Failure to do something may mean the loss of any opportunity to explore calves marketed as electronically identified, source or age verified in today's market.

The concept of source and age verification is valid only when the original calf owner makes a legitimate attempt at validating source and age as the calves leave the ranch or farm of birth. Once calves are sold and commingled, identification of source and age is not retroactive. The Dickinson Research Extension Center and the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association are working together to assist producers in becoming involved.

The default in this discussion is not a bias for more tagging and tracking; rather the effort has been initiated to provide producers, on a voluntary basis, with a view of how EIDs can be a marketing asset. There has been a lot of time spent making points and counterpoints and, regardless of the conversation, the beef industry is being asked to do something.

The reasons for action are as varied as the number of people in the conversation, but the bottom line is that right now

EIDs are voluntary. The dark side of the equation, however, is that if the industry itself doesn't respond, some group will respond for the cattle producer anyway. The bottom line for producers is that some level of participation in these programs is probably desirable.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center is distributing ear tags for those producers interested in marketing their calves in Dickinson in late October and early November. The point of the exercise is to get a solid grasp of what equipment, supplies and labor are needed to identify calves with an EID prior to or during the marketing phase.

The 2004 research effort of providing tags illustrated and set some benchmark values in regard to cost and time needed to accomplish this massive effort. The current effort will use the same focus, respond to many of the same questions, but utilize a marketing facility rather than the producer's place of operation as the central point of tag application.

Although tags can be purchased at most, if not all, livestock supply vendors, these tags will be distributed for estimating the impact of tagging operations at a marketing outlet. Key questions need to be answered. We know we can tag calves. Can the tagging be done with some level of professionalism, cost effectiveness and sanity?

Time will tell. The trial effort will help bring some insight to the answer. For now, the need exists to ponder at some depth just how an individual producer can become involved in change.

Welcomed or not, try a tag and see what happens.

May you find all your NAIS-approved 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 BT0265.

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