

Numbers, Different Functions, Different Outcomes

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The ability to understand the current thoughts on animal identification is difficult because of the mountain of identification programs available to producers. Originally, a unique individual number placed in each of the bovine family - cows, bulls and calves - seemed possible.

Recently (the past three to four years), the fundamental purpose of an individual animal number has taken on a different definition. The net result has been the advent of numerous programs for producers, which has caused some confusion.

Initially, individual animal identification began with purebred producers tracing the genealogy of their cattle. Tracking of offspring needed a process, and a simple, unique ID facilitated the desire. For health reasons, the tracking of animals entering the markets for intrastate and/or interstate commerce also was put in place during the same time frame.

Placing a unique tag with a unique number on each animal, either glued on the back or placed by means of a tag in the ear, was the most appropriate method. These two systems have worked side by side for years, with very little, if any, cross-utilization of the numbers.

Now, at least two additional processes are trying to become established in the industry.

The first, a more extensive health trace-back system utilizing standardized numbers and ear tags for 48-hour trace back is anchored in a system that allocates a number to every premises in the U.S. that has a reportable animal or bird in residence. The 48-hour trace-back process also calls for the placement of a unique animal number that can be read electronically and placed in a local, regional or national database for future tracing.

The trace could be tomorrow or 20 years from now. As an outgrowth of that system, the need has risen for verification of age and source of birth for those animals destined to meet certain marketing criteria that require age and source verification. It is important to realize that there was no connecting agency, department or process utilized in establishing the two systems. Numbers assigned for trace back involve the USDA Animal and

Plant Health Inspection Service - National Animal Identification program. Trace-back numbers are destined to rest in massive databases that eventually could be utilized. These databases only connect premises numbers with individual identification numbers and essentially stop at that point.

The second process, which was developed simultaneously, involves a massive effort by numerous entities designing and implementing processes that will verify the age and source of calves entering the market. These processes may require any number of identification systems, as long as they meet the process defined by the developer.

These developers simply may be offering a service resting on their own criteria of performance or they may utilize the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service - Audit Review and Compliance Branch to ensure the quality and credibility of the end product. Only the processes involving USDA (such as the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association CalfAID™ program) lead to another set of marketing verification programs for access to selected markets.

Unfortunately, there is considerable ignorance and confusion within the industry on what program is what. Caution would be an appropriate word of advice to producers before signing and becoming involved with any marketing process that requires individual identification for age and/or source verification. A producer never should sign a blank verification form.

Remember, tagging cattle for trace back is a completely separate and unlinked function from the marketing processes. Do not confuse the two processes because they have different functions and different outcomes.

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 BT0291.

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Animal Identification:

Path A equals 48 hour trace back

Path B equals age and source verification

Do not confuse Path A with Path B