

Ear Tags Are Like Seed - Only the Beginning

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



Upon returning from the national Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) meeting, I realize that as with any gathering of people, time needs to be spent pondering what was the general message or purpose of the meeting.

The BIF is the federation of associations or organizations that has as its roots the fundamental improvement of beef cattle.

Much of what has happened within the beef cattle industry can be traced to the efforts of the BIF. The individuals who make up the many associations or organizations are the federation members. The members are the ones who do the work, but the idea sharing and changing of principles occur at the seat of the federation.

If dreams mean anything, BIF is one of those vehicles for the fulfillment of those dreams. Some of those dreams involve genetics. BIF seeks to improve the genetics that make modern beef production what it is today. At the same time, BIF works to preserve the genetic diversity of the beef herd because of the many environments in which we raise beef.

An interesting fact is that all the focus has been and continues to center on the ability to individually identify an animal. Identification makes it possible to assess the genetic potential or performance of the animal and then develop mating systems to maximize the influence of those animals and prove genetic value. The subsequent utilization of those deemed to have superior economic or productive traits has changed the industry.

Today, the genetic combination of DNA transferred from one animal to another takes on more technology than could have been imagined when the federation started, but the fundamental mission has not changed. The mission remains one of improving the beef business.

As I pondered the BIF meeting, one common theme was the need to individually identify an animal. Equally important is the need to manage the data generated by each animal.

A good analogy of beef improvement associations is the sister organizations involved in crop production, the crop improvement associations. In the world of crops, unlike the physiological aspects of animal reproduction, a seed is very tangible. The seed is harvested, processed for various applications, stored, marketed and replanted.

The seed is just the start of the process. For instance, a wheat seed is not just a wheat seed. Records need to be kept to assure the variety. Soft white winter wheat, hard red winter wheat and hard red spring wheat are different types of wheat, generated by a seed that fits a very unique market. Again, the seed is only the starting point.

Hold that thought as one jumps back into the world of beef. The individual calf tag is the starting point. The cost of wheat production is not the price of a seed, nor is the cost of beef production the price of a tag. For some reason, as crop producers price their seed, they fully understand that there is much more to the purchase than just the price of a bushel of wheat.

Those producers present at the Beef Improvement Federation have a fundamental appreciation of what it really means to put a tag in a calf's ear. The tag is only the start of a long process, perhaps a lifetime process that, in the end, yields information capable of changing the industry.

Unfortunately, the beef business as a whole still looks at the tag as an entity in its own right rather than as a seed, the starting point of a process. This process will change what we do, provided it doesn't dry up.

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 BT0297.



**Ear Tags Are Seeds
Just Waiting to Sprout**