

BeefTalk: Animal Identification - Detectable and Recordable

The Question of the Day

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A typical attitude-producing discussion has and will be again about animal identification and traceability.

Attitude is always present. Unfortunately, attitude often is categorized as good or bad, which leaves the tendency to prolong discussions that otherwise could be brief. Perhaps it would be better if we could accept the fact that attitude exists and move on.

A typical attitude-producing discussion has and will be again about animal identification and traceability. In particular, the discussion is the desire or lack of desire to track cattle as they move across the vast lands around the world.

Attached to the discussion of animal identification is the term traceability. To "trace" means to follow. However, added words, such as carefully, painstakingly and transparently, add depth to the recording process that allows one to trace.

To "track" also is relevant because the path one would follow is essentially the detectable evidence that can be recorded, so one must note and write down what it is one is tracking.

Somehow, among the many attitudes or, perhaps better stated, the emotional accompaniments that add life to facts, the beef industry needs to move on. How long can an industry persist in a discussion of internals? In each of our worlds, we only can complain that we have a headache so long before the world simply passes us by. It's not very kind, but it is the reality.

A closer look at the cattle business would reveal a business that is very open to new technology on the surface but quite reclusive. Being reclusive by nature, any discussion of traceability is going to meet with persistent opposition.

Unfortunately, the discussion quickly shifts to animal identification. Animal identification still is a challenge in the implementation of any traceability system. That's because tracking requires a detectable, recordable process. Further discussion and technological advances within the industry all require increased detectable, recordable processes.

Out of coincidence, I emailed Carl Dahlen, a fellow Extension Service beef specialist with North Dakota State University, about the utilization of blood tests for pregnancy detection in cattle.

His comments were very positive with the following caveat, "In addition, recordkeeping and animal identification need to be impeccable. Mislabeled blood tubes or having multiple animals with missing tags or similar animal identification numbers can lead to the unintentional culling of pregnant animals."

Sound familiar? At least for anyone who has worked many cattle, the old question of who she is comes up. I got one of those calls just last week. Who are these cattle? Eleven numbers were emailed. Many dollars rested on the answer. An approximate estimate was not good enough.

I had to smile the other day after reading a great cattle newspaper. In the paper, I read a notation about how horrible the thought was of identifying animals individually. However, after turning the page, I read about the great advances available in identifying individual animal DNA and how great the value would be of knowing an animal's genetic makeup.

Obviously, every sample was labeled using a detectable, recordable process. In the end, the two stories, again giving way to a wide spread in attitude, result in the same ending, which is a detectable, recordable process that allows an individual animal to be tracked.

The same is true for the current discussion on animal identification. It is inherent to the system that adequate traceability must involve a process that is detectable and recordable. All animal identification methods work, but not all will stand up to the rigors of the very wide and variable tracking options within the industry.

All will require, as noted in the draft Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) rules for animal traceability, a legible copy of the input data that was detectable and recordable.

Detectable and recordable are two very big words and very relevant to the hours of upcoming discussion regarding the APHIS draft rules for the traceability of livestock moving interstate.

How does the cattle industry settle on a process that will carefully, painstakingly and transparently add enough depth to the recording process that the external world will accept without question our product's wholesomeness? We must be careful not to get lost in animal identification techniques. Instead, we need to decide on the process.

May you find all your ear tags.