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BeefTalk: Age and Source Verification Revisited



Age- and source-verification programs continue to play an important role in marketing cattle.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Ten years (as of November) have passed since the Dickinson Research Extension Center summarized research on tagging calves for improved market traceability, and the subject remains relevant today.

In the last decade, trading beef was, and still is, a complex pattern of pathways that involves many steps. Although selling cattle has been fairly simple throughout history, more recent desires continue to evolve processes that are not as

Images



To Tag or Not to Tag?
Age- and Source-verification Programs Continue to be an Important Part of Marketing Cattle

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straightforward as a simple handshake.

History changed the rules. There was no vote. There was no input. There was a simple acknowledgment that business as usual was not to be. A few more questions were asked, but in the end, life went on.

Producers are seeking an unencumbered environment that allows buyers from around the world to bid on their calves. The current environment seeks to maximize business options for producers. Producers seek the flexibility to market their stock that effectively capture value for them and enhance that value to all links within the beef industry.

During this decade, we saw many marketing options: sale barn auctions, video auctions, internet auctions, direct sales, alliances, branded programs and other alternative marketing arrangements, all considered beneficial and essential by beef producers for the identification and capture of product value.

Ten years ago, more uncertainty surrounded calf marketing. The national (and international) discussion about age and source verification heightened that uncertainty. The situations, names and places have changed, but the uncertainty remains, at least regarding age and source verification and potential trace-back of cattle that are sold.

Essentially, two products still remain: the “calf” and then the associated “data.” Both products have value, an important point to understand.

Today’s producers market a calf and the data about that calf, but the concept of marketing the data still is struggling in the pens and alleyways of the cattle business. Calves are sold in one direction, but data go in both directions, thus the concept of trace-back.

The challenge remains. The free marketplace determines calf value, but the value of the information associated with the calf has not been determined.

One point has become very clear: The information contains the keys to unlock the doors needed to enter the more complex marketplace, domestically and internationally.

While the keys may open the doors, one big question has resulted: Is this a burden or an opportunity? The data become knowledge and information, both powerful market tools. So, while we answer the question, care and caution must be exercised, particularly as data ownership, transfer and access are exposed.

As the Dickinson Research Extension Center expanded the effort of understanding the concepts and challenges of cattle movement, the CalfAID project (a local program for age and source verification) emerged. It’s an exciting and

interesting project that brought many participants to the table.

As time went on, additional marketing incentives or value-added programs were developed, inclusive of regulatory standards, with the understanding that the marketplace would determine the validity of the various programs. Has that happened? Maybe.

Optimistically, yes, but I would challenge commercial cattle producers to quickly name five new marketing opportunities in the last decade. Why? Again, opportunities are there, but for every move forward, new obstacles and new barriers seem to hinder the opportunity.

Unresolved questions still remain on all sides of the fence. These unanswered questions are real and inhibit participation in new marketing opportunities.

Movement of cattle is a delicate balance among the science, regulations and marketing advantages on differing issues, which continue to be unclear and not fully agreed upon by all stakeholders.

Whatever the issue, the national herd always must be protected from risks of exposure first. After that, demand and marketability of our nation's animals and products follows.

The beef industry needs a modern, effective

system of individual accountability, a system respectful of local concerns, realistic in response to pathogenic challenges, and responsive to industry needs and consumer desires for animals and people. As the confusion, positioning and jostling continue, we can only hope some light will come to the podium.

I thought this 10 years ago. Not much has changed.

The center did a lot of work, and when we closed the books on the CalfAid program, we experienced some heaviness of heart. Today, as news and other informational sources tease a response to age and source verification, those memories are real. The bottom line is: Our producers are up to any challenge.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or [✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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Attachments



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