

## Cut-out ear tag is a 9 on the Richter scale

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The day started like any other day. The usual phone calls, keeping pace with the data and other miscellaneous work seemed to be proceeding as usual. Then the word came, they cut out our ear tags.

That kind of news may be incidental to the rest of the world, but for those of us involved in animal tracking, the statement can be compared with a seismologist reading a 9 on the Richter scale after an earthquake. Everything is shaking and serious damage occurs, perhaps even irreparable damage.

For the CalfAID project, the damage is the loss of data. For more than a year, the Dickinson Research Extension Center has been actively tracking cattle. Premises-to-premises tracking essentially is finished and 99.5 percent of the calves were tracked.

The more serious issue of removing individual identification ear tags is becoming more apparent and presents many challenges. Tag removal essentially is accidental or intentional.

The accidental removal or simple lack of tag retention is a random event that occurs infrequently. Although the study was not designed to test tag retention, calves do lose ear tags. The solution is to replace the tags at the next working event. These numbers can be factored into the data set as an acceptable loss and the new numbers manually re-entered in the data set.

Intentionally removing ear tags has two scenarios. First, the historical practice of removing all ear tags to give the lot of cattle the impression of uniformity at resale is common in backgrounded calves. Eventually, education will curtail this practice. Second, intentionally removing ear tags occurs when existing noncompatible, yet ISO-compliant, electronic identification tags (EIDs) are replaced with individual system compatible EIDs within existing cattle facilities.

The CalfAID team is finding EID removal a common occurrence as calves are moved to a second premises. Generally, the calves are moved to a feedlot, although backgrounding facilities also could have an established working facility requiring a certain tag. Data shows the

center had 228 calves sent to an existing feedlot, only to have all 228 EID tags removed and replaced with the feedlot's 228 EID tags.

This points to a serious lack of infrastructure within the industry to mandate any sort of compliance with any one particular EID or radio frequency identification system. Processing facilities, that at one time were state of the art, are now behind the eightball in technological implementation.

Requiring change may seem easy to an outsider, but to an insider, when fast-paced daily operations never slow down, implementing change can be a nightmare. The issue is not only ear tags, but also readers, cables, input/output devices and numerous integrated circuitry components.

The CalfAID team is struggling with the U.S. Animal Identification Plan because of these issues. A uniform, nationally recognizable numbering system for individual animal identification simply cannot happen in a system that cuts out tags and replaces the tag to match dated data systems.

Daily progress is marked, but the integration of the system from birth to harvest presents many challenges. A fresh, nonrecycled EID placed in a calf on the day it is born needs to remain and be read at weaning, the backgrounding lot, feedlot and the packing plant.

Patience may be a more needed virtue as the beef industry works through various solutions. There is a basic need for continued educational efforts throughout the beef chain, beginning with producers. There also exists a need to allow adequate adaptation time to convert current systems to meet the new ISO-compliant systems.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at [www.BeefTalk.com](http://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](http://www.CHAPS2000.com) on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0239.

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