

BeefTalk 468: One Out of Five Is Not Good Enough

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As fall approaches, producers are thinking about selling calves. This involves the associated management and health programs that go along with preparing calves for market.

The empty pens mean cows and calves are still on grass, but that will change soon. Speaking of change, things change a little each year a producer brings the calves to town.

This year is no different. Current topics center on animal identification, as well as other managerial and marketing thoughts.

As noted previously, four points emerge from these discussions. The four are food safety, seamless regionalized calf-to-feedlot health connectivity, implementation of improved RFID (radio frequency identification) technology and value capture for the producer.

One could ask if those thoughts are in order because they could be reversed, so returning value to the producer could be first. However, the order is quite dependent on who is in the room. Priorities for each segment of the beef industry are different, but the dollars are still competitive within the industry.

A few years ago, the Dickinson Research Extension Center began documenting the flow of cattle from one segment of the industry to the next in an effort to better understand the current state of the beef industry regarding electronic cattle identification and the ability to track cattle.

The research has yielded considerable data on tracing cattle. The center asked two questions. First, how effective is the current system to track cattle movement? Second, how effective will the electronic identification of individual calves be?

The center distributed 23,229 low-frequency tags. After the calves were tagged, individual producers conducted business as usual and the center's team initiated an extensive trace-back effort once the calves were sold.

Tracking involved extensive contact with producers, stockyards, brand offices, buyers, backgrounders and feeders. To date, the estimates of calf movement indicate that approximately 23 percent have been retained on the producer's place and are assumed to be herd replacements. (The center has not tracked cull heifers, cows or home harvest).

As these calves left the place of birth, the DREC research team estimated that more than 21 percent of the calves were traced all the way through to harvest so carcass data could be retrieved. More than 33 percent were traced to the feedlot, but the center was unable to trace the calves to the place of harvest. Just more than 8 percent only could be traced to the backgrounding facility. Just more than 14 percent were not traceable from the first point of sale.

The results have not changed much during the years of tracing. The principle point of loss was during the marketing process.

Calves moved through or were commingled with larger groups of calves, so the ability to follow the calf to the next destination was not available or not recorded. The current systems for tracking cattle only are moderately effective. The systems are not 100 percent effective.

At what point additional tracking systems are required still is unknown. Additional diligence in the current tracking systems certainly will cut down on the calves not accounted for.

In the end, only one out of five calves returned carcass information to the producer. Although the reasons vary, the door remains open for producer frustration.

As has been noted before, the value discussion and subsequent return to the producer is real. The dollars just need to flow as is indicated with the range in carcass value at the rail. The opportunity is evident in the value spread at the farm or ranch gate and the rail.

We talk about value, but impact and opportunity never will be realized for the producer until, as a cattle industry, we measure what we want to improve, identify what we measured and market what we identified. One out of five is not good enough.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

Accountability

23,229 calves recorded by the
Dickinson Research Extension Center

Calves as replacements	23.1%
Calves with carcass data	21.3%
Calves traced only to feedlot	33.3%
Calves traced only to backgrounder	8.1%
Calves lost at first point of sale	14.2%