

BeefTalk 496: Ear Tags Have It

There is enough money being offered for the purchase of age- and sourced-verified calves that heads slowly are starting to turn.

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Lately, the subject of ear tags has been a major discussion topic. Perhaps, with more interest and demand for age- and source-verified calves, the reality that today's producer not only markets a calf, but also markets the information about that calf, is hitting home.

While the free marketplace determines calf value, the value of the information associated with the calf has not been determined.

As the process struggles in the pens and alleyways, one point is becoming very clear. The information allows producers access to domestic and international markets.

During a five-year research project (2004-08), the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association and the NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center tagged 23,229 calves. We found that 23.1 percent remained on the ranch or farm of birth as replacements or for home harvest.

We traced 8.1 percent of the calves offered for sale to backgrounding lots (lots designed for slower growth prior to a full finishing program). We traced 33.1 percent to feedlots for finishing and 21.3 percent were traced successfully to the point of harvest. The remaining 13.9 percent couldn't be traced.

Despite the enthusiasm and desire for cow-calf producers to provide the calf and the corresponding data as a marketable package, only one in five calves arrived at harvest with the data package. That means only one of five calves at harvest was eligible for markets requiring age and source verification.

Producer-based programs that document affordable and creditable data still are in their infancy. However, listen carefully because the eggs are starting to hatch.

Yes, the programs still cost money and cattle that are handled still shrink. However, there is enough money being offered for the purchase of age- and sourced-verified calves that heads slowly are starting to turn.

Source and age verification is a process that involves several important components. The preparation of a calf and the accompanying data package must be verifiable and auditable.

CalfAID is one of the processes available. CalfAID is a program through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agriculture Marketing Service that verifies source and age, to the extent possible, through data management, electronic animal identification and traceback.

The process is not simple, but it's not difficult, either. It is a management mind-set. Calves in a process-verified program must be documented using proper individual electronic and visual identification and have an appropriate paper trail.

The process starts with a calving book. Producers who do not appreciate the two-pronged sale (calf and data) will tend to struggle. The efficiency of the process depends on technology working in environments that are not technology friendly.

Although low-frequency electronic identification technology was the primer for the concept of calf plus data, the time constraints of restraining individual animals slowed the implementation of the process. The future is brighter because new high-frequency technology is more appealing.

The new radio frequency identification (ultrahigh frequency) tags will be more compatible with the industry, less intrusive in the daily handling of cattle and improve auditable tracking for domestic and international shipping. So, why all the ear tag chatter?

Maybe we are starting to understand the costs. Ranch tags and data cost \$5, cattle work and documentation \$7 and feedlot and harvest data \$8 for a total of \$20.

We might be starting to acknowledge the real costs to producers, which are an additional \$20 for cattle shrink. However, industry markets are starting to suggest a \$35 to \$50 premium per head to producers involved in age- and source-verification programs.

Maybe new tag technology that includes a new ultrahigh frequency tag and associated equipment that effectively reads and documents cattle movement within milliseconds and with 100 percent accuracy is soon to arrive.

Maybe industry acceptance is well on the way with speed of commerce movement to the beef industry, including auditable domestic and international data manifests that work.

Maybe industry partners are ready to implement new relationships to create new opportunities.

Maybe an improved response is achieved. Let's keep chatting.

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.

Moving Forward With Ear Tags

Currently

Despite the enthusiasm to deliver the calf and the data, only one in five calves at harvest is eligible for markets requiring age and source verification.

Future

New and improved technology will bring speed of commerce movement to the beef industry including auditable domestic and international data manifests that work, but it will still take a calf with an ear tag.