

*Above and beyond
mandatory ID*



The good herdsman knows his cows, and they know him. It may be easier for them, since he is one and they are many. That's why herd owners began using individual identification (ID) on their cows a couple of centuries ago. The reasons for knowing continue to grow, but don't count government mandate as the main one.

If you can't tell your calves apart, they may have outstanding uniformity that adds to their value. But they are not all the same value after harvest, processed into case-ready beef cuts. To secure your place in the beef industry of the 21st century, you have to know those value differences and bring them back to bear on both parents and upbringing.

Critics of individual animal management include some who see cattle as generic tools to harvest grass, those who employ composite breeding and, in range country, those who see physical and labor barriers to keeping track of individuals. But any alliance manager can point to producers who had a paradigm shift when they saw the range of value differences in group data. You want to cull from the bottom end of the cowherd when 10% of the calves lose half of your profit. But you have to know which 10% to cull.

You can't keep your head in the quicksand of average values indefinitely. For one thing, buyers are tracking uniformity, performance and value. If your cattle don't have it, now's the time to get it. If they already have the uniformity, now's the time to make them uniformly better.

The specter of mandatory ID also looms over the beef industry. Producer associations are working with government and industry to develop excellent voluntary ID programs. But the U.S. government has sent signals that it may force you to ID those calves within a couple of years if you don't respond to the market carrots. You could probably meet future source-verification demands with group tags the day calves leave your farm or ranch, but you'd gain nothing in the process. Why not lay the foundation for an ID system that will work for you?

Most cows already have some form of ID, sometimes backed with logic. You may have bought cows with faded ID tags. Before you replace them with new tags, check to see if the old tags convey information. The international year-letter code means that old "W125" was born in 1987, perhaps the 125th calf born on the ranch of origin. The letters follow the alphabet, except for I, O, Q and V, which allows for 22 years between the K born in 2000 and the previous K, born in 1978. Teeth can help you approximate ages if you want full individual data on your cows.

Those old cows very likely bear brucellosis or "Bangs" tags as well, metal clips that veterinarians must insert in the ears of official calfhood vaccinate heifers. Each clip has a unique number traceable to state and year, and represents a sometimes-overlooked means of permanent identification for the breeding herd.

Insert double ear tags for your cow ID system at pregnancy check, and cross-reference those with the metal clip or tattoo. Include bulls in your backup ID system, because they lose tags more often than cows. Freeze branding and brisket tags work well for many herds, too. High tech options such as electronic ID are increasingly practical and fit well into the vertically cooperative beef industry.

Low-tech methods still work well on some ranches, where ears are notched at birth and more easily read ear tags applied at pasture turnout, when notches are decoded and assigned numbers that correlate with their dams. Some producers are successful at simply writing down the calving date, sex and dam of each calf as it's born, then "pairing up" a group by observation every couple of weeks. Others plan to do that but never succeed in gaining a positive ID on more than half of the calves.

The only sure way to ID and match all calves with cows is to be there the day they are born with tag and applicator in hand. The smaller the calving area, the easier that is, but many producers use larger pens, paddocks or pastures to enhance calf health.

If a pen is large enough for the new pair to take flight, tagging depends on cow disposition, terrain and producer agility. A horse can help you get the drop on a newborn, but engine noises from ATVs may alarm cows to take off sooner. If flighty pairs are a problem for you, consider subdividing pastures, setting up a pass-through corral, and culling problem cows.

Next time we'll take a closer look at predictability in beef production. Questions or comments? Call toll-free 877-241-0717.

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