



# TAGGING SYSTEMS 1.0

*ABB EXTRA* readers share tips for tagging.

by Shauna Hermel, editor

Whether you are trying to communicate to your spouse which baby needs doctoring or trying to match pairs to move pastures, having a system to help identify cows and calves can be a great asset in managing your herd.

In mid-January we asked our *Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA* subscribers for input on what kind

of identification (ID) system(s) they use when tagging calves. The response was overwhelming.

Within a week we received 170 email replies, with input from people from four different countries.

As you might expect, ideas offered were as diversified as the beef industry. Systems ranged from one self-proclaimed lifestyle rancher with a dozen cows who said he could visually identify

them without tags to very elaborate systems for herds that include seedstock, commercial cattle, embryo transfer (ET) recipients, multiple owners, etc.

We won't have room to share all of those ideas in this issue, but we'll get a good start with some of the most common tagging system features. We'll follow up in our April issue with some of the more unique and more detailed systems.

## Starting with a base

Many of our respondents use a combination of a number designating the year in which the calf was born and numbers indicating the sequence in which it was born. Thus, with a three-number system, the first three calves in 2019 might be numbered 901, 902 and 903.

If you have more than 100 calves to tag, you'll run out of numbers. You can double the number of calves the system will handle by running separate sequences for heifer calves and bull calves. So, you would have two 901s — one a heifer and one a bull.

To rapidly tell the genders apart, several of our readers shared that they use blue tags for bull calves and pink tags for heifer calves. Others use a different ear for heifers vs. bulls, tagging the females in the left ear and the males in the right ear or vice versa.

Herds saving replacement females with some longevity note that this system can result in two cows tagged 605 — one born in 2006 and one born in 2016. While you might visually be able to distinguish a 2-year-old from a 12-year-old when you're looking at them, knowing which one is which in a list of cows preg-checked last week may not be so easy.

To solve the problem, several of our readers said they have moved to four-digit numbers using two digits for the year. So, a cow born in 2006 would be tagged 0605 and the cow born in 2016 would be 1605.

Another option uses International Year Letter Codes

(see Table 1) as a solution, avoiding the fourth digit or reserving it for something else. Recommended by the American Angus Association, the system uses a different letter of the alphabet to denote the year. S was the letter designated for 2006, D for 2016, so our two matrons would be tagged S605 and D605.

The drawback is that it may not be intuitive what year a letter stands for without a cheat sheet. Also, while the letters are used in sequence, alphabet order doesn't always translate to birth order, as in the case of our matrons.

### Timing

Another common theme among the responses was tagging the calf at birth with its mama's number, then retagging it with its individual number at weaning or as females are identified as replacement heifers. The practice helps in pairing up cows and calves, report those using the system. To ensure identity, several producers said they also tattooed the calves at birth with their individual ID.

"We tag at birth and tags stay the same for the life of the animal," says Tom Anderson, sharing that Anderson Angus of Saint Johns, Ariz., uses the letter year code and birth sequence numbering system with blue tags for bulls and pink tags for heifers (see pictures, above right). "This year our first calf was a bull, so he was tagged with a blue tag, and his number is G01."

To complete his tagging system, Anderson puts the sire number above the calf's individual number and the dam number below. He also uses the back of the tag for date of birth and herd number.

### Color coding

Many of our respondents prefer to use one color for their tags.

David Loutzenhiser says he prefers to use yellow tags because they show numbers the best. His neighbors tag with other colors, which makes it easy to sort if cows or calves somehow get together.



"We tag at birth, and tags stay the same for the life of the animal," says Tom Anderson of Anderson Angus. They use the year letter code followed by numbers sequenced by birth order. Tags are color-coded by gender, so the first bull calf in 2019 is given a blue tag with the number G01.

**Table 1: International Letter Code System\***

\*NOTE: I, O, Q AND V ARE NOT USED

2002	M	2012	Z	2022	K
2003	N	2013	A	2023	L
2004	P	2014	B	2024	M
2005	R	2015	C	2025	N
2006	S	2016	D	2026	P
2007	T	2017	E	2027	R
2008	U	2018	F	2028	S
2009	W	2019	G	2029	T
2010	X	2020	H		
2011	Y	2021	J		

Les Craft shares that he uses different colored tags to distinguish the month the calf was born — yellow tags for January, white for February, blue for March and orange for April.

At Michigan State University (MSU), tag colors denote breed, shares Daniel Buskirk, associate professor and beef extension specialist. The purebred Angus cows receive black tags, and the crossbred cows receive green tags if sired by a Simmental bull and white tags if sired by an Angus bull (see Fig. 1). The system makes it easy to sort and maintain breeding groups visually.

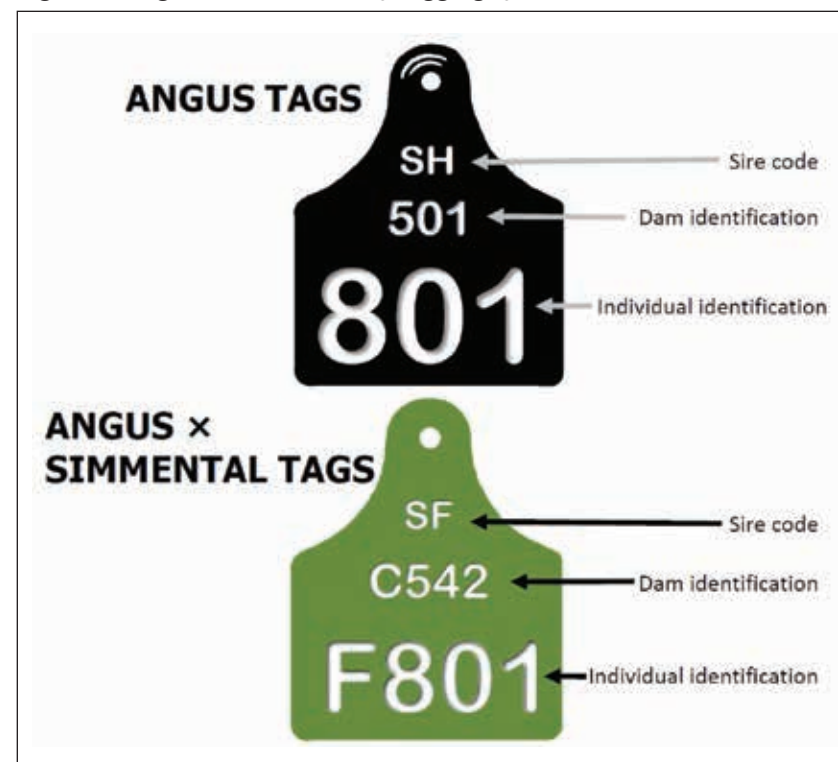
Back in the day, your author's folks used tag and ink color to signify sire groups. Sire A's calves received blue tags with white ink, while sire B's calves received red tags with black writing, for example.

Another respondent said she tags all calves born within the year with the same color, then switches to a different color the following year. They use seven different colors, so they start the color sequence over every seven years.

### Added information

A common thread among the responses was adding information to the tag besides the ID number. Probably the most common was adding a sire code and/or the dam

**Fig. 1: Michigan State University tagging system**



Michigan State University color-codes tags to indicate breed makeup, shares Daniel Buskirk. Cows in the purebred Angus herd get a black tag. In the commercial herd, green tags denote Simmental-sired cows and white tags denote Angus-sired cows. MSU includes a sire code and a dam code on the tag above the individual's ID number.

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number to the tag. Often the numbers are added to the front of the tag above the calf's number, or one number above and one below.

Many producers make use of the back of the tag, adding the calf number so they can read it as the calf is walking away, the dam's number, their herd logo or contact information.

Dave and Yvonne Hinman of Malta, Mont., say they buy black Ritchey® large four-digit engraved tags, with the first number being the last number of the year born and the other three being sequential. They prefer the engraved tags because the numbers show up well and don't wear off, says Yvonne.

When a calf is born, the Hinmans engrave the sire tattoo on the top of the tag. Rather than using Ritchey button backs, they buy white Allflex® medium tags, which fit together with the Ritchey tags. They use black markers to write the dam number on the side that faces the outside.

To avoid a heifer calf getting the same number as a cow 10 years

older, Dave reviews his list of active cows and skips those numbers.

### **Making it work for you**

Elizabeth Stough, Petersburg, Tenn., says Little Valley Farms employs a lettering system in its commercial herd to identify calves by the month born, which is useful when identifying potential replacement heifers or

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### **Association requirements**

To register an animal, the American Angus Association requires members to individually identify animals with a form of permanent identification.

Rule 105 states: "Each breeder shall devise a plan or system of permanent identification, utilizing a series of numbers, a series of letters or a combination of both, provided however that permanent ID marks shall be limited to a maximum of five (5) characters per animal."

Only Arabic numbers and capital letters are allowed. Other characters, symbols, reversed letters, punctuation marks, etc., are not.

The rule also says no two animals of the same gender born in the same year and registered by the same member can carry identical permanent identification.

The Association accepts a tattoo in both ears or a freeze brand or hot-iron brand on one side or the other as a form of permanent identification. Tags are not considered permanent.

For more on Rule 105, visit the *Breeder's Reference Guide* posted to [www.angus.org](http://www.angus.org).

### **What's the EXTRA?**

In case we have you wondering, the *Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA* is a digital supplement to the magazine. With the *Bulletin* published only five times per year, we wanted to have a means of delivering information to our commercial audience on a more frequent basis. So, we started a monthly electronic supplement.

Emailed on or about the 20th of the month to those who subscribe to receive it, the *EXTRA* carries 25-30 articles divided into sections for news highlights, health and nutrition, management, and marketing.

There is no fee, and anyone can subscribe. If you're interested, check out the current issue at [www.angusbeefbulletin.com/extra](http://www.angusbeefbulletin.com/extra). You'll find a link to subscribe in the upper right corner of the page.

replacement-quality heifers they plan to sell.

The calf's number consists of the last two numbers of the year born, two numbers to denote sequence and a letter to denote the month born. A, B and C represent January, February and March; J, K, L represent September, October and November. A 2019 spring heifer might be 1901A, while a fall heifer might be 1966L. The dam's number is printed above the calf's number, and the sire's nickname is printed below.

Another detail: If they purchase a female to add to the herd, they add an X to the number they assign her. Above that number, they put a P followed by the last two digits of the year she was purchased.

Reed Cattle Co., Lincoln, Ark., uses a letter-number system. For the registered herd, the letter denotes the year born. The next number is the month in which the calf was born, and the last number denotes the order in which the calf

was born, explains Mike Reed. For instance, E510 was given to the 10th calf born in May (5) 2017 (E). For the commercial herd, the letter is at the end of the number, so 510E.

Janice Burgess, Burgess Angus Ranch, Homedale, Idaho, says they tag calves with the dam's number at birth to make pairing easier. The commercial calves all get red tags — the only color not used in their purebred herd.

Heifers, she says, are tagged in the left ear so it won't interfere with the Bang's tag. Steers are tagged in the right ear. The heifers will get their own number at weaning.

"I order the tags from Custom Cattle Tags, with the heifer's number in the center and Burgess Angus Ranch on the bottom," she says referring to the

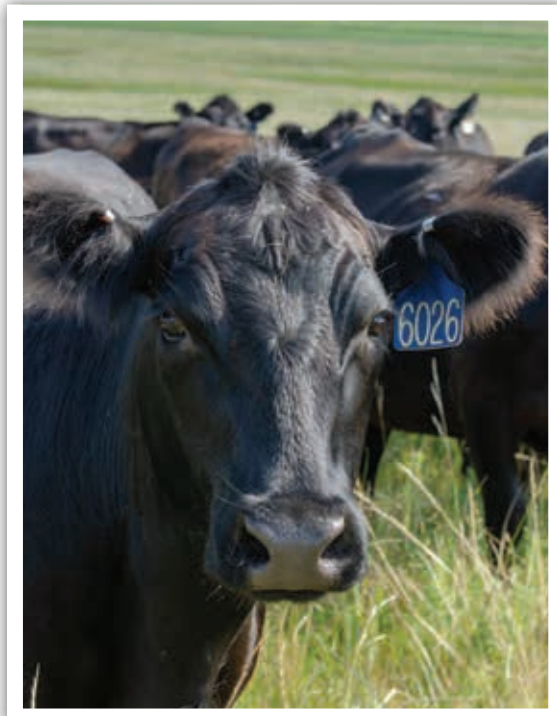


PHOTO BY SHAUNA HERMEL

Tag retention was a common concern voiced by respondents. Backup plans offered included tattooing calves at birth, using brisket tags, double-tagging and branding. Whitman, Neb., producer Chris Vinton (featured on page 102) uses a metal tag similar to a Bang's tag, but with the animal's individual ID.

simple as a set of blank dangle tags or as elaborate as dangle tags laser-marked with individual numbers provided in an Excel spreadsheet, a farm logo and other information combined with an RFID button.

For heifers chosen as replacements, the dam's number is inked above the calf's number.

Replacement heifers and bulls are freeze-branded, she explains. "Every other calf trades its ranch tag for an AngusSource® tag at weaning to be sold on the video auction."

Burgess says they ear notch the tag of any calf they treat to indicate it has fallen out of their natural program.

We'll share more ways cattlemen have adapted

identification systems to their particular situation in our next issue. |

Association's online tag store, [www.customcattletags.com](http://www.customcattletags.com). Through the site producers can order tags as