

ANGUS

BEEF BULLETIN

"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

Volume 19, Number 2 • March 2004

A Simple, Effective Way To Make Money

Identification programs help producers manage their herds.

Story & photos by
BECKY MILLS

Never mind the ongoing debate over country-of-origin labeling (sometimes referred to as COL or COOL). Never mind the talk of a mandatory national identification (ID) program. The No. 1 reason to put a tag in a calf's ear is because it helps your operation.

"We've been identifying our cattle since the early to mid-70s," says Randolph, Ala., commercial producer Butch Lovelady. "I can keep up with these calves while they are growing. If the calf isn't growing or has a disposition problem, it is easy to pick him out."

"We identify the cattle from the start," says Jimmy Bowles, cattle manager at Graham Angus Farm, Albany, Ga. "If you don't have an identification system, you can't tell what you're doing."

"We couldn't do any of what we do without an identification system," agrees Bill Graham, owner of the 700-cow purebred operation.

Both Lovelady and Bowles tag calves soon after they are born with the same number as the cow. "Then it is easy to know who belongs to who," Lovelady says.



Cows and calves have the same ear-tag numbers at Graham Angus Farm.

First things first

Actually, the first tag at Lovelady's isn't an ear tag, but a patch like you see on stockyard cattle. "I put a number on one side, glue on the other, and ride by and slap it on the side of the calf," he says. "Then, once a week we get the cows and calves up, and I put an ear tag in." Since he's already identified the calf with the sticker, he has no trouble figuring out what calf belongs to what cow when they are milling around in the pen.

Lovelady's numbering system is made up of three numbers. The first is the year, for instance, a 9 for a cow born in 1999. The second is a sequential number, like 01, 02 or 03. When he is tagging a calf, he also puts the sire number on top of the calf's number.

"That way I can measure the cow and the bull while the calf is growing," he explains.

Bowel simply uses the dam's herd number, which also has a number for her sire's line. Even though the cows are freeze-branded, he depends on the ear-tag number, which is the same as her brand number, when he is tagging



Jimmy Bowles, Albany, Ga., says their management hinges on their ID system.

calves. "That way, when we catch the calf to tag him, we can see the cow's tag because she is looking right at us."

He also tattoos the calves at birth. In addition, Bowles puts the numbers on the front and back of tags so he can read them easily in the chute. He adds, "I use the biggest tag I can

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At Graham Angus Farm, bulls have the same number on their ear tags and freeze brands.

get, even in the calves, so I can see them.”

To make chute chores easier, Lovelady tags his steers with a yellow tag and the heifers with a white tag. “Then I know not to implant the heifers,” he says.

After his heifers are weaned and he’s picked out his replacements, Lovelady replaces the calf tag with a tag bearing the heifer’s own unique herd number. He puts a tattoo in the inside of her ear, too. “I usually keep around 70 replacement heifers,” he says. “If two black ones lose their tags after they are weaned, I don’t have a clue which one is which. The tattoo is a backup.”

At Graham Angus Farm, the keeper heifers also get their own herd numbers at weaning and receive freeze brands.

While it is labor-intensive, Graham says ID isn’t an option in his operation. “If you can’t identify an animal, you can’t do much management.

“When we weigh at weaning, we compute an adjusted 205-day weight. We cull the bottom end of those calves then,” Graham continues. “And, if cow 162 had a lousy calf last year and this year, she’s gone. She quits eating our feed.”

That performance-driven attitude has put Graham bulls in commercial and purebred herds nationwide, as well as in bull studs.

“In our case it is also important to know which ones didn’t breed,” Graham says. “We have a split calving season. If a cow misses one calf, we move her to the next season. If she misses two calves she goes to the stockyard.”

Lovelady agrees that tagging is a time-consuming chore. He also says tags aren’t perfect and can get lost or deteriorate. But, he says, ID is crucial to his operation.

“If a calf doesn’t do good, we keep an eye on the cow and the bull. If it is the cow, we cull her. If it is the bull,

we cull him. That’s how we’ve improved the herd.”

That’s also how he manages to sell truckloads of Angus-Simmental steers that average 785 pounds (lb.) straight off the cow. Or heifers that practically sell themselves in special off-farm or private-treaty sales. Or cows that earn productivity awards from the Alabama Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) year after year.

Sale tickets and plaques aside, he says, “The number one advantage to identifying cattle is in keeping replacement heifers. Records are the next step up from identification, and we know the record of every cow on this farm. Once I have a history of each cow, it is easier to cull the low

end and keep heifers out of the top end. That’s how we continually improve our herd.”

Tagging tips

A tag doesn’t do much good if it’s stuck in the mud around a hay ring instead of in a bovine’s ear. But Scott Holt, Northwest Regional Manager for Allflex USA, says there are ways to increase the odds that the tag will stay in place.

“First, it is best to use the same brand of applicator as the brand of tag,” Holt says. “Next, if it is an option, dip the tag in a little disinfectant. That cuts down on the risk of infection and lubricates the tag at application.”

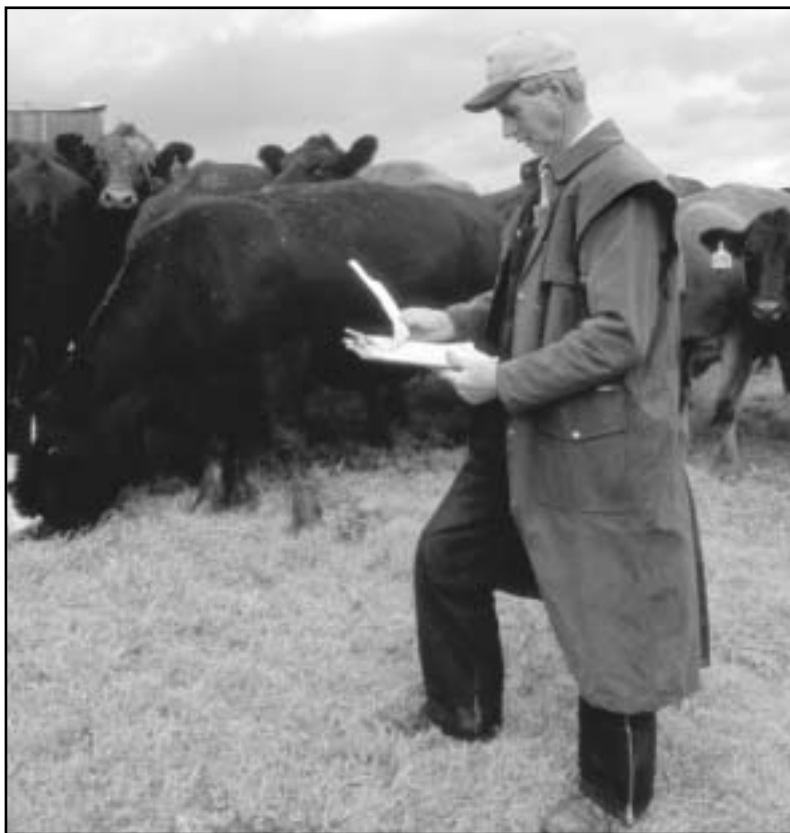
Tempting as it may be, Holt warns against trying to place a new tag in an old hole. “Typically, you’ll nip the edge of an old hole and the opening gets bigger. That affects retention in the long haul.”

He also recommends placing the tag in the middle of the ear, an equal distance from the top to the bottom of the ear, as well as from the skull to the end of the ear.

“That is better for both visibility and retention,” he explains.

Holt says the size of the tag affects retention. “Generally, the bigger the tag the poorer the retention. If your operation is brushy and retention is an issue, you might

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Butch Lovelady, Randolph, Ala., uses ear-tag numbers to keep performance records on his commercial herd.

Founded March 1985
ANGUS
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Produced and published by Angus Productions Inc. in cooperation with the American Angus Association and Certified Angus Beef LLC.

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Make Money (from page 4)

want to try a size smaller. If you have large grassy pastures and you need to be able to see the tags at longer distances, use a bigger tag.”

He also says, “As animal identification becomes more important, it helps to have a backup tag. It can be a smaller button tag.”

Last, he says the numbers applied at the manufacturer generally last longer

than hand-applied numbers. However, he says, “If you do hand-number the tags, wipe them with alcohol first. That gets the surface oil off. Then mark the number with a pen. The number will stay on longer.”

**AngusSource: Tags with a mission**

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, there should be a lot of flattered Angus cattle. Today, there's hardly a breed that doesn't claim black-hided cattle. But that can make it tough to tell the real Angus feeder calves from the merely black ones.

Enter AngusSource. Debuted by the American Angus Association in August 2003, AngusSource documents both the origin and the management practices of Angus-influenced feeder calves and replacement heifers.

To enroll, a producer lists the calving season dates and location, the registration numbers of the sires and/or maternal grandsires, pays \$1 per animal, and receives AngusSource tags seven to 10 days later.



“These tags convey to buyers that the calves aren't just black, they are Angus,” says Matt Perrier, director of commercial programs for the Association.

That's just for starters. The American Angus Association also offers the option for cattlemen to record the vaccination and management protocol on the group of calves and provides a listing of the calves for sale on the Association Internet sales site 90 days prior to the sale.

“AngusSource is a marketing tool to display and document how a group of animals have been treated,” Perrier says. “We've tried to keep it as simple as possible. The producer can take the information he already has in a pocket notebook or on a yellow legal pad and put it in a standardized form to show potential buyers. Hopefully he can channel that information into real dollars and premiums. And best of all, he does not have to commit to one type of marketing situation. He can sell the calves in any fashion, at any time.”

If a producer already has a numbering system, he or she can order AngusSource tags with customized numbers. Or producers can order tags that have a blank space so they can number them.

The AngusSource tags also show the state of origin of the calves and include a herd location code, as well as a unique national identification (ID) number. That means if a national ID system becomes a reality, the AngusSource tags meet the requirements.

However, there is one thing AngusSource tags can't guarantee. Feedlot and carcass information is not automatically sent back to the producer when the calves are harvested. “It can be used in that way, but the cow-calf producer needs to specify up front to the buyer that he wants that information,” Perrier says.

Still, Scott Holt, Northwest Regional Manager for Allflex USA, says AngusSource is worth the producer's time. “It is one of the best programs going for simplicity and benefit to the producer. Information is power. And if we know more about our cattle than the next guy, we have the potential to sell the animal for more money.”

For more information on AngusSource, visit www.angussource.com.