



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

Ear-tag management in cattle can enhance herd identification and improve recordkeeping.

by **DAVID BURTON**,
University of Missouri; &
KASEY BROWN, *associate editor*

Ear tags are important to the beef industry as a means of individual animal identification (ID). There are other ID methods used, like tattoos, freeze brands, hot-iron brands, brisket tags, horn brands and others.

“Some of the other methods

have limitations and are seldom used, compared to the ear tag,” said Eldon Cole, University of Missouri (MU) Extension livestock specialist. “Even though a high percentage of beef cows and calves in southwest Missouri have tags in their ears, the real benefits of ear tags may not be fully realized.”

A number of steps can be taken in regard to ear tags, Cole says, that would enhance their value in any herd.

duplicate numbers if replacement heifers are retained.

Do not change numbers. “Some producers tag calves at birth with a small tag. If a heifer goes into their replacement pool, they re-tag them with a larger tag and a different number so they don’t duplicate their dam’s number,” said Cole.

When selecting tag colors, be sure the tag and ink color are readable. Research has shown that black ink on a yellow tag is hard to beat in terms of readability.

Using different tag colors to designate sires is okay, as long as a unique number is placed on the tag, Cole says. “I’ve seen herds in which the tag color became the way to distinguish between two No. 24s. One may be a blue 24 and the other one black 24. Of course, when they come through the chute they could both end up as B24.”

Placement and use

Do not include the calf’s life history on the front of the tag, Cole advises. “Use the back of the tag if you want to include sire, dam and birth date.”

Use good penmanship, he adds. “If you print your own information on the tag, make sure whoever does it made an A in penmanship in school. Don’t try to write the number on the tag while the animal is in the head

chute slinging [its] head around.”

Tag placement is best in the center of the ear or slightly toward the head. Tags are lost from pullouts if they’re located too low or too far out toward the tip of the ear, Cole said. “If long hair in the ears causes readability problems, clip the hair when they are in the chute, since it’s cheaper than a new tag.”

Identification

Backup identification comes in handy in case of lost tags. Tattoos or brands serve well if they’re readable, or consider placing a tag in each ear.

Tagging male calves in one ear and females in the other at birth is a step that can aid in sorting sexes later.

Keep all forms of identification consistent.

“I’ve been on farms where the animal had three different numbers, one in one ear, a different one in the other ear and a freeze brand with a third number,” says Cole. “It was hard to tell which one is the primary identification.”

Cole says if a producer buys animals with meaningless numbered tags to their herd, remove them. “This happens when cattle are bought with lot numbers in their ears. We tag Missouri Show-Me-Select heifers with a number we use to track later performance, so leave those tags in place,” said Cole.



PHOTO BY KASEY BROWN

The Tag Store offers Duflex® visual tags in a wide range of colors, sizes and customizable options.

Numbers and colors

For example, Cole says to keep the numbering system used on the tags basic. A combination of the alphabet and numerals is widely accepted. International letters are designated for birth year for livestock identification, and B is the designated letter for 2014. Using B as the calf crop year along with numerals to indicate order of birth, would yield tag numbers of B001, B002, etc., for calves born in 2014. The 2015 letter code is C.

Cole recommends giving calves a unique number, not their dam’s number or your grandchild’s name. This will help avoid confusion caused by

Other considerations

Don't get your tags from the local sale barn, vet clinic or locker plant, Cole advised. "I'm a believer in cutting costs, but a \$1.25 tag to put in a \$1,500 to \$2,000 cow or her \$900 calf isn't a bad investment."

If using fly tags, consider placing them on the back side of the ear to prevent covering up the ID tags when placed in the same ear.

Keep an ear-tag knife handy at the head chute to remove unnecessary tags, especially insecticidal tags that have been spent.

Consider a well-tagged set of calves a marketing tool, said Cole. "Prospective bidders will assume if they're well-tagged with a system, they likely have good genetics and management behind them."

Angus resources

High-quality ear tags are worth the expense, and the American Angus Association provides affordable options. The Tag Store was launched to give cattlemen a source for low-cost, high-quality, custom-printed ear tags through www.customcattletags.com. Cattlemen can build custom tags step-by-step and preview a mock-up of the engraved tags before ordering.

The Tag Store sells exclusively Destron Fearing™ products, which allows the Association to pass on lower prices. The Tag Store offers Duflex® visual tags in a wide range of colors, sizes and customizable options. Add a management number to the front of the tag for free. Print logos or text on the back of the tag or on the tag stud for a small fee.

Ginette Kurtz, manager of the AngusSource® Genetic program, elaborates, "If you're like me, you have many ideas for tags, but just don't know how they will really look. If you visit the website, you can create a proof of the tag prior to ordering and test-drive the colors and placement of the text on the tags.

"Maybe you want the cow's number above the calf number and would like to add the sire's name below the calf number? You have that option, and you can even add your phone number or brand to the back of the tag," she continues. "The options are endless, and it's fun to experiment. You can even customize the tag stud you are going to use."

In addition to the visual tags, Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags are available as an individual e.Tag® or paired with a visual tag in a ChoiceSet™. RFID tags offer producers the opportunity for more advanced and efficient electronic recordkeeping. RFID e.Tags assign a unique numeric identity to livestock through universally recognized radio frequency technology. RFID e.Tags can be read by all ISO-compliant readers.

Another option is the 840 Tags™ that are available as a visual, e.Tag, Combo e.Tag or ChoiceSet for producers with a premise ID. The 840 tag is an official ear tag for all states that can be used for

all regulatory programs such as interstate commerce and disease-control programs.

All Destron Fearing tags now feature Dark and Durable for the management number. The logo(s) and customized text lines will continue to appear dark gray in color; there is no black ink applied to the laser engraving.

Accessories are also available through the Tag Store. Applicators, readers, panel

antennas, headgate kits, markers and knives can be purchased below retail prices on the website.

The Tag Store also supplies tags for the AngusSource Genetic program, which verifies the genetics, source and age of your enrolled calves. More information on AngusSource Genetic and its added value can be found at www.angus.org/angussource/.

Visit www.customcattletags.com for more order and product information.

For questions regarding within-herd identification, contact your local extension office.



Editor's Note: *Burton is civic communications specialist for the University of Missouri in southwest Missouri.*