

CALVING EASE

November 2004

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Doing ID Right for Replacement Dairy Heifers

As soon as you have more than one calf, each calf needs some easily read form of identification. A few of the “on-farm” reasons for individual animal identification include (a) proper feeding, (b) correct and timely medication when sick, and (c) record keeping.

The big “off-farm” reason is the emerging national identification program. The goal of this program is to allow reliable “trace-back” on any animal from its current location to its point of birth including any stops along the way within 48 hours. This ID program will emphasize both permanent and multiple means of identification.

Doing ID Right: Permanent

The most common “permanent” ID currently in use is the steel ear tag. Farms that vaccinate for brucellosis will have two tags in each animal: one so-called “state” tag such as 21XRW8951, and the other, the brucellosis tag such as 21VHC4626.

Proper placement of these tags can make a big difference in whether or not they stay in place. They need to be located no further out than one-third of the ear from the head. Placement into the ear is important also. Proper placement as a calf is to allow just enough space for a pencil between the “U” in the tag and the edge of the ear. Too far out, the tag gets snagged on something and it tears out. Too far in, the ear grows out around the tag causing tissue damage and the tag has to be removed manually.

With each tag recorded, the chances are low that a heifer will pull out both tags at once. Much of the value rests on the records. In the first place, they must be accurate. Nothing is more frustrating than finding two animals with the same recorded ear tag information. I have found “pack rat” mentality quite helpful in solving these kinds of mix-ups. Storing the original worksheets used in the barn or at a processing chute doesn’t take that much space. More than once I have hauled out these manure-stained notes. There I found the blurred “8” that was keyed into the computer as a “9.”

Secondly, the records need to be “permanent.” Well, nothing is really permanent. But, we need to plan on these ID records being around for at least ten years. Paper of all qualities will last that long if kept in a reasonably dry place. If the barn burns down, we are just out of luck.

But, what about electronic ID information? Those data are subject to at least two threats. One, the computer hard drive crashes and we have no back up. It is not excessively expensive to copy hard drive contents to an external drive automatically every day or week.

Two, we adopt new software that will not read the old files written by an older program. This issue comes up particularly with data files more than four or five years old. Regularly translating files to the most recent software solves this problem. However, this task has the attractiveness of pitching ensilage by hand from a tower silo or mucking out the hen house. Ugh.

Doing ID Right: Multiple

Why multiple? Everyone that has worked with heifers and cows know this answer. If it is possible to lose all ID, a heifer or cow can do it!

In spite of all my careful ID work, there was always at least one animal a year on our operation that we had to identify by body markings. I'd get the person with the best pattern recognition skills to look at her. "It's either 2185 or 2651. I can't tell for sure," would be the response. Since 2185 still had tags and I couldn't find any animal with 2651 tags, the tag-less heifer became #2651.

This anecdote highlights an important ID management issue. Methods of identification are only as good as the management team that maintains them in or on the animal. It is hard work to identify missing ID's and even harder work to systematically replace them. Among heifers, a best management practice is to replace missing ID's every time heifers are moved.

Metal tags in both ears are a start toward multiple means of identification. Recent advances in technology are giving us more choices.

Now available is a plastic button containing a radio readable code. The button is called a transponder. It can be attached to a bovine ear just like a regular plastic ear tag. Approximately one inch in diameter, these button ID tags stay in ears very well. The 15 digit ID number is printed on the tag in small letters for visual ID. I have to restrain heifers and get really close to the ear to read them, however. Regular large dangle tags with the last four digits of the longer ID number are essential for "in-barn" or pasture management.

Implantable chips are here. Research is still working on the problem of chip migration. That is, if not implanted properly, chips tend to move around under the bovine hide. This migration makes manual electronic sensing inconvenient. You have to wave the reader wand all around to find the chip. However, automatic electronic reading in a chute becomes unreliable if the chip does not remain close to its original implantation site. Recent advances appear to have solved much of this problem.

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