

Identification in Beef Cow-calf Herds

More and more people are talking about identification of livestock as a need for the future. Without identification it is not possible to have good records of animal production and make good management decisions.

The USDA's National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) collected data on individual and herd identification practices from a representative sample of cow-calf producers from 23 of the leading cow-calf states.¹ Overall 2,713 producers with one or more beef cows participated in the NAHMS Beef '97 study. These producers represented 85.7 percent of United States beef cows (as of January 1, 1997) and 77.6 percent of U.S. operations with beef cows.

Overall, 48.1 percent of producers used some form of individual identification on calves. Of these producers, most used plastic ear tags to identify individual calves (40.7 percent of producers). Each of the other methods of identifying calves specified during the study was used by 6 percent or fewer producers. Use of individual calf identification was related to herd size with a much higher percentage of large operations reporting use of individual calf identification compared to the smallest operations (Figure 1). Accounting for the larger percentage of use in bigger operations, it is estimated that 64.7 percent of calves were identified individually on the cow-calf operation (assuming that all calves were identified if an operation reported any calves identified).

A higher percentage (53.2 percent) of cow-calf operations reported some individual cow identification

Figure 1

Percent of Operations that Used the Following Individual Calf Identification Methods by Herd Size

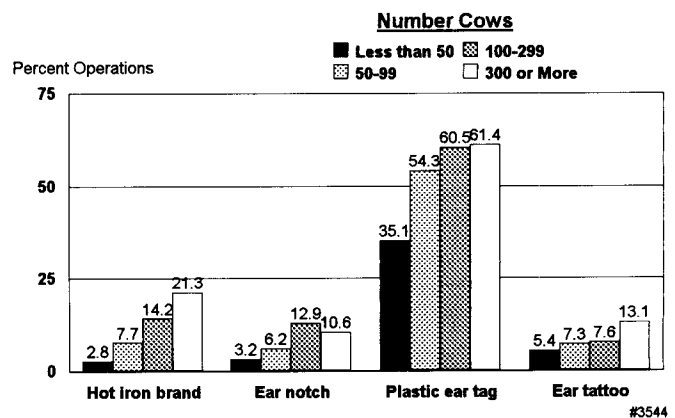
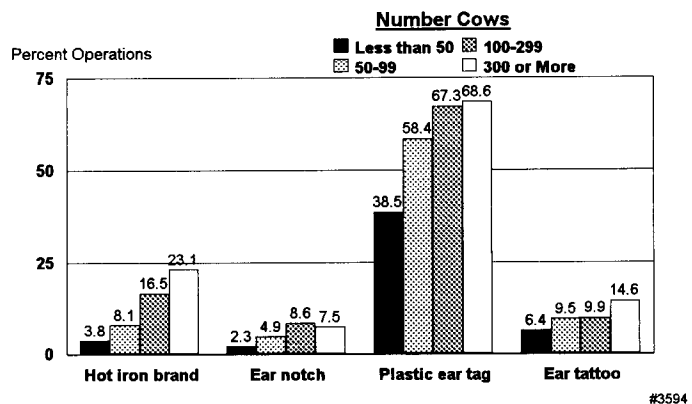


Figure 2

Percent of Operations that Used the Following Individual Cow Identification Methods by Herd Size

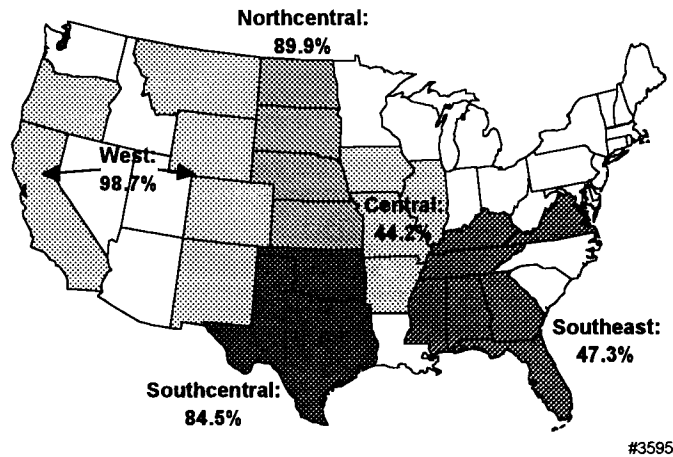


(Figure 2). Again plastic ear tags were the most common form of identification, and a much higher percentage of large operations used some individual cow identification. From this study, it can be estimated that 76.9 percent of cows on the largest operations (with 300

¹ Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Wyoming, and Virginia.

Figure 3

Percent of Beef Cows on Operations that Used Some Method of Herd Identification* by Region



*All animals have the same identification.

or more cows) were individually identified compared to 47.1 percent of cows on operations with less than 50 head of cows.

Some forms of herd identification are used to discourage theft, aid return of lost cows, and facilitate sorting of animals in common grazing situations. However, some herd identification methods (e.g., brands) can lead to concerns for quality of by-products from beef production, such as hides. The National Non-fed Beef Quality Audit estimated a reduced value of \$4.56 due to brands for each non-fed animal harvested in 1994. In addition, brands on fed cattle contributed to a \$24.30 loss of value due to hide defects for every fed steer and heifer harvested, as estimated by the National Beef Quality Audit of 1995.

Overall, 51.0 percent of herds reported some use of herd identification with hot iron branding (26.6 percent) and plastic ear tags (27.0 percent) the most common methods used. Use of herd identification was strongly related to herd size and to geographic region. Approximately half (42.5 percent) of the smallest herds (fewer than 50 cows) used some sort of herd identification, while 98.9 percent of the largest herds (300 or more cows) used a herd identification method.

Herd identification was more common in western herds (98.7 percent of beef cows) compared to the central and southeastern regions (Figure 3). A high proportion (96.9 percent) of beef cows in the west were on operations that used hot iron brands for herd identification. In part, this high percentage may be due to a requirement for use of some public grazing such as on Forest Service lands.

Without individual identification, producers are unable to keep records of individual animal performance on which to make management decisions. Larger operations are more likely to use herd and individual identification. These practices should assist cow-calf producers in making better management decisions.

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