

Animal identification eases disease control

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The branding practices of the Old West still serve many purposes today. But they are more than just a way to settle livestock squabbles. The practices of tagging, branding, tattooing and branding are also instrumental in the control and eradication of costly animal diseases.

For example, brucellosis, a reproductive disease, costs the cattle industry over \$56 million each year in direct production losses, as well as disease control expenses on

the farm. Taxpayers contribute \$90 million per year in state and federal funds to control and eradicate the cattle disease. Without such controls, however, USDA officials estimate that within 10 years the losses to the cattle industry through brucellosis disease could exceed \$850 million each year.

Only through comprehensive animal identification can the source of a threatening livestock disease be quickly traced, according to Fred Powers, a

program specialist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). Proper identification - coupled with disease surveillance programs - can also help improve livestock quality through monitoring of the livestock population and pinpointing diseased herds which may than be freed of infection.

On the other hand, lack of versatile, widespread identification slows disease eradication efforts. Four

steps are essential for the surveillance of animal health: application of identification devices, maintenance of herd-of-origin records, identification recovery, and the correlation of information to trace disease outbreaks.

A prime example of identification as a disease control measure is the Market Cattle Identification program instituted by Washington state in 1955 and adopted nationwide in 1960. It involves putting official backtags on cattle at market. The tag, which often doubles as a market's sale tag, denotes the state where the animal originated, market in which it was sold and the animal's owner. Market operators keep sale and tag records.

The tags are used to identify blood samples collected at livestock markets or at slaughter for brucellosis tests. If test results indicate disease, veterinarians can trace the animal's movement back to the owner and start ap-

propriate action to eliminate infection in other cattle. "This is much easier and far less expensive than 'down-the-road' testing of every eligible cow," Powers points out.

In 1977, 27.3 million head of the nation's cattle were backtagged, compared with 1.4 million 14 years before. This increase reflects the livestock industry's realization that a uniform identification system and accurate records are necessary for an effective disease surveillance program.

"More precision and standardization in backtagging would greatly improve the program's effectiveness level," said Powers.

If all markets used the official backtag for maintaining records of sales as well as identification, he said, and if all states used standard size tags with the standard coding system and adopted uniform policies for collection of blood samples at slaughter, the program would avoid unnecessary complications. But the identification is only as good as the care taken in applying the tag, Powers said. A few buyers have switched or removed tags before or after interstate trade, complicating the tracing of infected and exposed animals. USDA levies fines up to \$500 for the interstate movement of cattle without backtags.

Powers believes these practices occur because some producers and

livestock dealers do not understand how identification relates to animal health. Better communication between state-federal health officials and cattle owners can help solve that, according to Powers. "Disease eradication programs rely on the cooperation of market operators and livestock producers," he said.

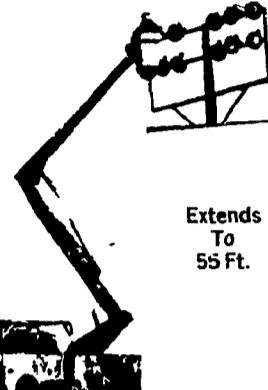
Some other methods for livestock identification include orange-colored vaccination ear tags for calves, bangletags, hot brands, freeze brands, slap tattoos for swine, and leg bands for birds. Examples of disease-status identification include the "B" and "S" brands on the left jaw of cattle, the first indicating the animal has brucellosis and the second that it has been exposed or is a suspected carrier.

Powers described the ideal identification tool as one that would be permanent, economical, easy to apply, legible, specific to each animal, minimally painful to apply, tamperproof and adaptable to coding and computerization. Producers and market operators may soon start using a newly developed electronic identification system to meet these needs.

Electronic identification operates by means of a device implanted beneath the animal's skin. It can be activated to transmit the animal's identification number and body temperature. USDA supported

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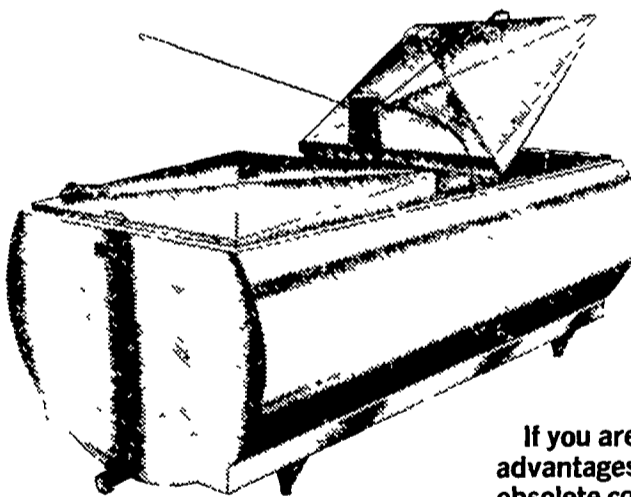
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