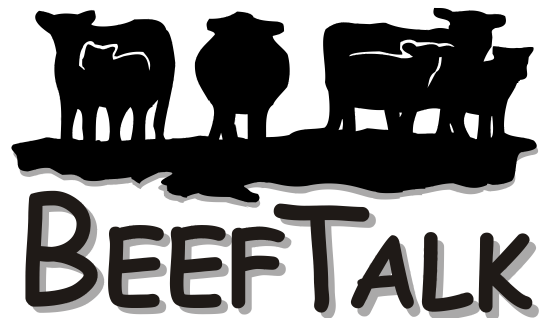# Tracking cattle requires more than an EID ear tag

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service

The Dickinson Research Extension Center (DREC) has and will continue to tag and track cattle as the industry evaluates options to meet the goal of the National Animal Identification System (NAIS). As stated in the strategic plan by the USDA, "The goal of the NAIS is to be able to identify all animals and premises that have had contact with a foreign or domestic animal disease of concern within 48 hours after discovery."

Eighty-six producers initially contacted DREC for involvement with the CalfAID program. Twenty-six were selected, primarily based on their ability to schedule herd work at appropriate times and their previous involvement with record systems or cattle accessibility. Initial tag placement was accomplished by DREC's Identification Team, which worked 5,170 calves, 944 cows and 37 yearlings at an average time of 1.1 head per minute.

Once the calves were tagged and returned to pasture, the traceback team began monitoring the movement of the calves and continues to do so. The DREC is cooperating with producers, stockyards, brand offices, buyers, feed yards and packers in tracking the 2004-born calves.

As of June 20, of the 5,170 calves, 1,037 calves (20.1 percent) are still at their home birthplace, 1,122 calves (21.7 percent) are spread out across various backgrounding facilities, 1,686 calves (32.6 percent) are in feedlots throughout the central portion of the country and 1,308 calves (25.3 percent) have been harvested. Only 17 remain untraced, lost after the initial sale of the calves.

In terms of calves still at various backgrounding facilities, 887 calves (79 percent) have had their identification tags removed and 39 calves (4 percent) cannot be scanned due to reluctance on the part of the current owners. These 926 calves are untraceable and represent the single most difficult group of calves, those calves that are comingled and/or re-sorted during the marketing phase. Currently, the North Dakota Stockmen's Association is tracking these calves.

In addition to the backgrounding difficulties, in the feedlots 308 calves (18 percent) have had their identification tags removed and 305 calves (18 percent) cannot be scanned, again due to the reluctance of the present owner. These 613 calves will not be traced.

The center has spent 815.3 hours tracking the 5,170 calves. To get to this point under the concept of 48-hour trace-back, 102 people would need to work a combination of eight-hour shifts to get the job done in a total of 48 hours. At this point, the 17 calves that were lost during the initial sale of the calves will be joined by the 926 calves that had their tags removed or we were denied access to and the 613 calves lost in the feedlot. The loss of these 1,556 calves will detract from the outcome.

Tracking cattle is not just a matter of putting an ear tag in a calf. Electronic identification (EID) tags cannot do it all. Cooperation is and will be needed among producers, buyers, brand offices and anyone else involved in the marketing and processing of beef cattle.

In the end, once the radio frequency identification tags (RFID tags) are placed on an animal, the RFID tag must remain. The tags must follow the international standards for RFID tags. Low- frequency RFID EID tags work, but current technology and an individual producer's ability to adapt and implement technology have critical shortcomings in completing the expectations being presented by the USDA's NAIS system. Time will tell.

May you find all your NAIS-approved Ear Tags.

Your comments are always welcome at *www.BeefTalk.com*. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to *www.CHAPS2000.com* on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0253.

Current Status of DREC's Traceback Efforts on 2004 Born Calves

Total	Replacement	Background	Feedlot	Slaughter	Untraced
5170	1037	1122	1686	1308	17
	20.1%	21.7%	32.6%	25.3%	0.3%

Background footnote
- 79% of calves sent to backgrounding lots had tags removed
- Backgrounding lot owners would not allow us to scan 4% of calves sent to them

Feedlot footnote
- 18% of calves sent to feedlots had tags removed
- Feedlot owners would not allow us to scan 13% of calves sent to them