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Eye on the ID

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EYE ON THE ID

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Ray and Linda Gilbert
Andrea Gilbert
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Buffalo, South Dakota

INTRODUCTION

The Gilbert family has ranched in northwestern South Dakota for over one hundred years. We run a commercial Angus cow herd of approximately 900 mother cows. Our emphasis is on replacement heifers and feeder steers. The hot iron brand has been and is the method of identification used on Gilbert Angus cattle within the brand inspection area of Western South Dakota. The first brand was registered in the late 1800's according to the brand papers held by Frank Gilbert. The Cross J Bar brand was the identification used to distinguish Gilbert cattle then and is still used today. As the fifth generation enters the business, we have added other individual brands but use the original for the corporation cattle. In addition to hot iron brands, we ear tag every cow with individual numbers and ear tag their offspring with corresponding numbers on day of birth. This information is stored in a CowSense™ database. The replacement females retained within the herd receive an ear tag indicating year and genetic ID.

DECISION TIME

As new issues arise concerning the beef industry it is becoming more apparent that decisions made at the producer level will impact each stage of the process to deliver a final product to the consumers. As part of our research into the use of electronic ID's, we watched the national panel convened on RFD TV in April to discuss the various approaches to use of the RFID. There was an indication that feedlots were prepared to accept and wanted calves with the electronic tags. I questioned the panel concerning mature cows showing ownership with only a RFID and how we could deal with theft. One of participants indicated that they were not advocating the elimination of hot iron brands but using RFID tags in conjunction with other identification programs.

The feeder calves from our ranch have been marketed on the Superior Livestock Video Market™ for several years. During the past year, Superior Livestock came out with a new age and source verified program called VASE. It required the producer to obtain RFID tags. The calves could be tagged with the RFID anytime before delivery date.

PROCEDURE

After a great deal of debate, we decided to market our steer calves using the VASE program. We already had the age information. As part of the process, the Gilbert Angus Ranch applied for a South Dakota Premise ID number. The number is obtained online

through the state website. This fulfilled our source requirement. We then proceeded to research the various companies for a database and RFID tag source. Superior Livestock sent a suggested list of names. Contact with the companies gave us a wide spread of prices for the tags from two dollars to five dollars per tag. We also researched various companies utilizing web information and talked with representatives. AgInfoLink™ had the most appealing product for our operation. At that point, we contracted the calves with Superior Livestock™ with VASE label and under the VAC 34 program. We would tag the calves with pre-scanned Alflex Half Duplex™ tags when giving the fall shots and cross reference the numbers with existing tag numbers. The pre-scanned tag numbers would be entered into the AgInfoLink™ database.

MARKETING

The steer calves were consigned to the video market in June. The feeder that purchased the calves would take October 10th delivery. The most surprising part of the sale was the fact that the feeder preferred no RFID tags. He felt the tags would be a waste of our money and time. We have worked with this feeder before and have always received carcass data from him. Since he is involved in the restaurant trade and the steers have worked in the past, we can only assume they will work with or without RFID. We did not see a premium for selling them under the VASE program in 2005. This is only true for our calves.

CONCERNS

1. Permanent ID

As this debate continues rage among the industry, the Gilbert Angus Ranch has more questions than answers concerning the NAIS. Producing cow herds with only RFID tags to show ownership seem to be an easy target for cattle theft because the tags can be removed and replaced with different ID numbers indicating a new owner. While no system can be without flaws, hot iron brands will be permanent. Brands and brand inspection will provide similar information as electronic ID concerning tracking of animals. Brand books are open to the public already. This problem seems to be two pronged as ownership of a mature cow herd and data on feeder cattle are going to require different animal health tracking information. According to discussions with industry representatives, the technology to trace each carcass to each package is not yet available. As we understand our research, when the animal is harvested, the ID is no longer part of the tracking procedure.

2. Trace-back Liability

According to the *Beef*, June 2005 issue, the cattle industry must have standards and compliance of ID to be globally competitive. The simple fact remains that Gilbert Angus Ranch and other producers like us are sending a product out at six months of age to be harvested at twelve to twenty months of age. Anything that happens to that animal during the resulting span of time is still going to be our liability within a trace-back system using a NAIS. The decision to become part of the electronic ID system is not one to be made lightly. Who will be held ultimately responsible for the product---the producer, the feeder or the packer? And if it is important to comply with a national ID system, will all the beef imported

from every other country also comply with the same ID system before we put it on the United States consumer's table? Will those countries be required to meet the same health and quality standards as we do? USDA recently told the public at the ID Info Expo in Chicago that one of the most important points of the NAIS is 48 hour trace-back through the use of all technology including brands. If we have the use of brands and the inspection process in our state, it seems this would be more fiscally responsible for South Dakota rather than the RFID tags and an additional database. This would entail involving the entire state of South Dakota in a brand inspection area. A large number of operations out of the existing brand inspection area already own a brand for their cattle business.

3. Database and Regulation

Over the course of the last three months, the NAIS has been on a constantly changing course. The most recent decision to maintain a private database as per USDA's decision suggests the entire cost of the NAIS will be the responsibility of the producer. The USDA indicated at the ID Info Expo that the government will not pay any cost of this program. However, the state and federal officials will have access to the information within the database. It is also our concern that a private company in charge of the database will have the authority to set costs according to membership within industry organizations. How much of the information of the privatized database will be used for animal health surveillance or could it be used for privileged information? Several technology experts have indicated to us that no database is completely secure. If the regulation were left at the state level using existing data such as brands to be merged with other states' data, this would seem to be more cost effective. Experts indicated at the Kansas City meeting that this would be an acceptable method. We would have the source verification that USDA is going to require along with an existing database of identification such as brands.

Other questions arise such as: Who inspects the movement of cattle with electronic ID's? Who pays the wages? How are they trained? Are they state or federal? Will the regulators be independent of the privately held company administering the program?

CONCLUSION

The topic here today was to address animal identification and making it work in the cattle industry. There are several sources of animal identification. On the Gilbert Angus Ranch, we will continue to use a hot iron brand to indicate ownership. Electronic ID's may be helpful in marketing or herd management. However, under the present technology, the vast array of readers and RFID tags are going to add cost to our bottom line. Unless we can justify the additional cost and see a profit generated, the producer who is targeted to bear the cost must weigh the decision carefully. Within our own private database on CowSense™, identification by brands and our tags has been effective for herd management purposes. We receive carcass data, culling information, and selection of quality females using ear tags. Whole herd data is obtained with the brands. The implementation of a mandatory ID system must be proven beneficial for *ALL* within the beef industry and the consumer. It is our belief that the beef industry must not become a slave to one technology but build a system that enables us to embrace a common sense approach to animal tracking. We at the Gilbert Ranch will continue to keep an "Eye on the ID".

