



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Management Section

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Cattle Identification

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Establishing a permanent form of identification for cattle is important for two primary reasons: (1) To provide permanent identification that facilitates keeping records of individual cattle and (2) to serve as a method to determine legal ownership.

Identifying cattle as the property of an individual has been an accepted practice for cattle producers for hundreds of years, although the means of identification have often varied. The importance of proof of ownership is still relevant today. As agriculture and cattle production have changed, so has the need and means of securing permanent identification for individual cattle in each herd.

The importance of individual animal identification is becoming increasingly necessary in order for producers to optimize production and profit potential. Increasing emphasis on beef quality and the need to ensure point source verification indicates the potential for mandated, permanent, individual animal identification. Identification systems need to include the following:

- Permanent (life-long) individual identification.
- Easily read at a short distance.
- Important information about the individual.
- Part of a system to allow tracking of cattle and information.

It is important for producers to stay current with technology to ensure they are spending time and money wisely. It is also important to make sure that the current means of animal identification are meeting existing needs as well as being useful for future changes.

Methods of Identification

Hot Iron Branding

Hot iron branding has long been considered the standard for proof of ownership. When properly applied, these brands are recognizable and permanent. Most western states require that individual brands be registered with the State Department of Agriculture. Although these brands

are permanent they can be difficult to read when the hair of an animal's coat becomes long and may obscure the view of the brand.

Hot iron brands permanently damage the skin. This identification method decreases hide value for the tanning industry. The 1999 National Beef Quality Audit stated that hide damage from poorly located brands or multiple brands cost producers on average \$3.10 per head.

Hot brands can also be used as a means of individual animal identification. These brands most often are a number brand located on the hip or shoulder. A numbering system will be discussed later in this publication.

Hot Iron Branding Procedures and Considerations—Hot iron brands have been the long running standard for owner identification. Some producers also implement an individual numbering system for their cattle using hot iron brands. When hot branding, cattle producers should remember these points:

1. Proper restraint of animals is essential for quality brands.
2. The branding iron must be correctly heated. When using traditional branding irons they need to be hot enough to glow red in the dark but not so hot to burn through the hide. Many producers are now using electric branding irons that have their own temperature control.
3. For quality hot iron brands, the construction of the iron is also important. Surfaces of the branding irons need to be 1/4 to 1/2 inch wide. Corners and circles on the branding iron need to be vented (have open spaces) to prevent scarring and leaving hard-to-read brands.
4. When branding, irons need to be held in place firmly until the branded area is a rich tan color that looks like new leather. The color of smoke is a good indicator of sufficient iron application.