



PHOTO BY RENAE TOKACH, NJA/ANGUS JOURNAL PHOTOGRAPHY CONTEST

CUSTOM ID SYSTEMS

Readers share their individual tagging systems.

by Shauna Hermel, editor

‘I want my numbering system to be blatantly easy to understand and fast to interpret,’ says Zak Miller, who with his brother, Rick Miller, owns and operates White Sands Co. of Saint Anthony, Idaho.

While most cattlemen would share that sentiment, the interpretation of what’s fast and understandable is as varied as the environments in which they graze their herds. In January, we asked our *Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA* readers to share what works for them in terms of an in-herd identification (ID) system.

Overwhelmed with more than 170 responses, we shared some of the overarching similarities among systems in the March *Angus Beef Bulletin* (see page 70 of that issue). In this issue we’ll dig deeper into how operations have customized ID systems to fit their unique situations.

At their feedlot, the Millers use a

tag-notching system to indicate which treatment protocol (first or second) to follow. If a third treatment is indicated, they decide whether to treat again or look at salvage options.

For their cow herd, cows are tagged with different colors based on which pasture they will graze. Currently, the herd grazing Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) allotments is tagged with either white or blue brisket tags. All other cows that stay on private ground are tagged with red or green brisket tags.

Since a neighboring rancher also uses white brisket tags, the Millers are shifting to a two-color system using blue tags for cows on public lands and red tags for cows on private lands. Brisket tags are used because no one else in the area, save the one neighbor, uses brisket tags, making ID quick and easy.

All cows have a matching color and number ear tag as a second form of ID. Under the ear tag number, in smaller print, they include the year the cow had her first calf. This helps in separating young from old during calving season. At preg-testing, cows are separated to feed them more accurately according to need.

Numbers are used in sequential order. For instance, last year’s



Trinity Farms of Ellensburg, Wash., uses a uniform numbering system and tag color to help manage four distinct breed groups, says Robb Forman. “This makes alley sorting much faster and easier.” The first digit indicates year; the second, breed group. At birth calves are DNA-sampled with a TSU and given an 840 electronic ID, allowing for some automated recordkeeping advantages at the chute.

replacement heifers ended with blue 506. This year’s heifers will begin at blue 507. This pattern will continue until 999, then start over at 100.

Multiple forms of ID

At Strommen Ranch, Fort Rice, N.D., calves are given individual ID numbers composed of the last number of the year born followed by the order born, explains Aaron Strommen. So, the first calf born in 2019 would be 901, while the 157th calf born would be 9157.

While the calf ID is printed large in the center of the tag, Strommen includes a sire code above the calf’s number and the dam’s number below.

The calves are also tagged with a metal clip imprinted with their individual ID in case they lose their dangle tag. As yearlings, they are freeze-branded to match the ear tag.

Yellow Ritchey® tags are used to identify all of the registered cattle, says Strommen. The commercial herd follows the same system, but uses white Z-Tags®.

Embryo transfer (ET) calves get a cheaper white Z-Tag that denotes their sire and donor dam above the calf number and the recipient dam’s number below.

Jerry Gustin, Gloucester, Va., uses a similar individual numbering system, backing up the visual tag by tattooing the calf with the same number. On the calf’s visual tag, Gustin includes the sire below the calf’s number and the dam’s herd ID number

above (see photo of calf 718).

Printing the sire’s complete name on the tag, he says, helps customers as they are looking at the bulls.

For ET calves, Gustin adds the recipient dam’s number to the tag as well, placing it under the dam ID.



Gloucester, Va., cattleman Jerry Gustin includes the sire ID below the individual’s number and puts the dam’s ID above. Calves are tattooed to provide a permanent ID for registration and in case the visual tag is lost.

“That helps manage recipes a little better,” he notes. “Recipes are an essential element of the ET business, and it is important to me to track their performance in that role as well.”

While he has tried using different colored tags to denote heifers and bulls, Gustin says he found it to be distracting. Tagging all the cattle in the herd with the same-color tag makes the herd look more uniform, he explains. “That adds, in my opinion, to the feeling that the herd is well-managed, uniquely identified and uniform in appearance.”

Modifying to fit need

Grass Range, Mont., cattleman L.J.

Olson, Arrowhead Genetics, uses a consistent-color system. He tags heifer calves with blue tags, steer calves with yellow tags and registered calves with white tags. Previously, when he calved in February-March, requiring more personal attention, he tagged the calves at birth with the cow

number and the sire’s nickname on top. At Bang’s vaccination, heifers would get their own unique number with their dam’s number below and the sire’s nickname on top.

Olson explains the color system makes sexing calves at shipping a little easier. Neighbors claim their own unique color and/or brand of tag, which makes it easier to identify a calf that doesn’t belong.

When Olson changed his management system to calve in May-June to ease labor and match his forage resources, it meant he wouldn’t always be around when calves were born. So, this past year, calves were tagged at branding using the same color scheme, but rather than tagging with the dam’s number, they received their individual number denoting the year born and the order branded. As they mothered up in the pasture, he recorded the calf’s mama for a cross-reference. At Bang’s vaccination, Olson exchanged the calf tag with the cow tag with the sire/dam info.

Numbers tell a story

Dixie Mollenkopf of Laurelville, Ohio, shares that her operation

uses a three-digit number to identify replacement females, with the first digit representing the year and the next two digits being sequential, picking up where they left off the year before. Registered females get a year letter designation in front of their number to distinguish them from the commercial herd. The sire is indicated above the female’s number on the front of the tag, and her dam is indicated on the back of the tag.

“Each crop of replacements gets a different color of ear tag, and we put a tag in both ears,” says Mollenkopf. “The calves will get the same color tag as their dam, and it has the dam’s number on the front for easy sorting of pairs, along with the sire at the top.”

“The calf’s date of birth (month and day) is on the back,” she continues. “I like to know when that baby was born. When you get to a 5-year-old cow, just the year will suffice. We are lucky enough to sell most of our feeder calves locally, so I get a chance to see them when they are close to market-ready and really see what the genetics have produced. I can tell from those calf tags where we can make improvements.”

Twists on numbering

Dave Barrick of Middlebourne, W.Va., adds a twist to his four-digit numbering system. The first digit uses the international year letter code explained in last month’s issue. The second digit represents the month born, using a numeral

Continued on page 100

for January through September, an O for October, N for November or D for December. The last two digits represent the birth order of the calf within the year.

Dean Rhodus uses a three-line tagging system. The top row is an abbreviation of the sire's name. The second row is the dam's ID number. The bottom line is the calf's ID number, consisting of a year letter designation along with numbers representing the month and day the calf was born. For heifers the year letter is placed last; for bulls it is placed first. So, a heifer born Aug. 18 would get the number 818Z; a bull born the same day would be Z818.

Holt Family Cattle, Caldwell, Idaho, uses the year digit-birth order system, but adds a twist by repeating the year digit for bulls. So, in 2019, 9075 would be the 75th heifer born; 99025 would be the 25th bull calf born.



Holt Family Cattle uses a purple tag in a matched pair set to identify replacement heifers.

By using a 9 to precede heifer numbers (on yellow tags) and 99 to precede bull numbers (on orange tags), they can order tags preprinted with the calf's number, then write the sire and dam on the tag when the calf is born, explains owner Scott Holt.

For heifers retained in the herd, purple matched pair sets (dangle tag and RFID tag with 840 number) are ordered, preprinted with all three numbers.

More than a number

Ben Tokach, Mandan, N.D., says he uses the back side of the tag to denote twins and foster calves.

George Dean, Nicholasville, Ky., alternates tag color by year, noting, "I sometimes hold calves from one year into the next for backgrounding or replacement heifers." He tags heifers in the left ear and bulls and steers in the right ear.

Joe Waldner Jr. of Fairhaven Colony, Ulm, Mont., tags cows at preg-check time as a first-calf heifer, with the last two digits of the year making the first two digits of the four-digit ID number. Calves are matched with mom's number, with Angus calves receiving white tags and SimAngus calves receiving blue tags.

Vickie DeClerk of Engelberg Angus Farm, Pocahontas, Ark., tags calves with a small tag featuring the cow's number at birth, then at weaning replaces that tag with an extra-large permanent tag displaying the calf's ID. She saves the "baby tags," organizing them on rings in a plastic toolbox, to clean, remark and reuse on the cow's next calf. The toolbox is easy to carry to the pasture during calving season.

An anonymous respondent said they use tag color to denote ownership for an extended family who manages their cows together. Six "owners" equates to six tag colors. They notch the tags of heifers — and twice to denote a heifer twin to a bull.

Six "owners" equates to six tag colors. They notch the tags of heifers — and twice to denote a heifer twin to a bull.

At Sydenstricker Genetics, Mexico, Mo., Ben Eggers uses a dot system to identify what month calves were born. Dots above the number represent January through

Share your ideas on weaning, bull selection

This fall, the *Angus Beef Bulletin* will publish issues focused on weaning and prepping for breeding season. As we did with tagging tips, I'd like to get your input to share with the rest of our audience.

► **WHAT'S YOUR TIP FOR WEANING SUCCESS?** Do you have a handling tip to share with other cattlemen? How do you get calves on feed? What's your vaccination strategy? Do you have a suggestion for sorting?

► **WHAT'S YOUR CRITERIA FOR SELECTING BULLS?** Where do you go to find bulls? How do you select them? Do you require certain health protocols? Do you prioritize certain traits? Do you look at several seedstock sources, or have you relied on one seedstock source? Either way, why? What do you want seedstock suppliers to provide to help you make your bull selection decisions?

Please email your comments to me at shermel@angus.org, or mail them to Shauna Hermel, editor, *Angus Beef Bulletin*, 3201 Frederick Ave., Saint Joseph, MO 64506.

June; dots below the number represent July through December.

Jerry Crenshaw, Upperville, Va., notes that he uses a V notch in the tag to denote treatment with antibiotics, with one notch for each time the calf was treated.

"That way, it is easy to tell which calves have been sick and which ones have been repeatedly sick," he notes.

Following cow families

At Eggers Stock Farm, Jackson, Mo., Rick Eggers uses a letter to denote cow family, followed by numbers representing birth order within the family. For example, V205 would represent the 205th female in the "Evona Erica" cow family. The system gives every animal within the herd a unique number throughout the herd's history.

Brett Larson of Dry Creek Cattle Co. LLP, Ravenna, Neb., also likes to keep track of cow families, using the last two numbers in a three-digit system to represent the cow family and the first to represent year born. Cow 647 was born in 2006. Her daughters in the herd are 947, 047, 347, etc., he explains. "If I happen to keep a daughter and a granddaughter in the same year, I flip one of them to 74. This way I can track the cow family easier for

attitudes, udder quality, early gestation, etc."

Toby Eble of Eble Farms, Oz, Kan., uses another system for tracking maternal lines. The first number represents the year born. The middle digit(s) represents the maternal line and the last digit represents the number of calves that cow has had.

"Cow 341 had her fourth calf yesterday — 9414," he explains.

Resources available

We've made a dent in sharing the ideas offered by our *Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA* readers, hopefully giving you some practical ideas to consider in your own operation. We'll share a few more in the *Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA*, which you can find online at www.angusbeefbulletin.com/extra.

The American Angus Association does offer resources for tagging and identification in its tag store, where it offers Allflex® and Destron Fearing™ ear tags, as well as electronic ID readers, Allflex syringes and a wide variety of accessories. Visit the site at www.customcattletags.com. ■