

Wave of the Future

Electronic identification provides accurate information and aids in management decisions.

STORY & PHOTOS BY JAMI STUMP



Data collection hinges on accurate, dependable individual identification. AzTx Cattle Co. gives each animal an electronic ID number and a sequential ear-tag number.



Information about each animal is stored in a computer database and assigned an eight-digit ID number. That same number is stored on a microchip within the animal's small, circular electronic ear tag.



Proof from data is what producers, feedyards, packers and even consumers will request in the future. Source verification and information from electronic ID may offer the beef industry an efficient, cost-effective means to collect that information.

We all have seen pictures of the old stockyards — thousands of penned, fat cattle awaiting a railcar to take them to slaughter.

Producers of that generation would haul their short, stocky cattle to market, be handed a check and go home to produce a product they thought to be superior, receiving no feedback to prove their theory.

With the passing of years, a change in cattle feeding and management has occurred. The beef market has become consumer-driven; and to consistently meet consumer demands, producers are relying on new technology and information — information that will aid in making genetic, feeding, slaughter and other important management decisions.

AzTx Cattle Co., Hereford, Texas, started listening to producers' requests for more information four years ago. Its conclusion was to implement an electronic identification (EID) service that would provide accurate information to producers.

As one of the nation's largest independent cattle-feeding companies, AzTx also recognized that an EID service would benefit all segments of the beef industry.

"We want to see the industry move forward," says John Josserand, president of the company. "This is not just a producer service we are providing. We believe that source identification and carcass information are going to play a big role in the future success of our industry."

Electronic identification

By using the EID service, producers get back reams of information on each animal they market. This is because the ID stays with the animal all of the way through the process.

"If the service and information is used correctly, producers can see genetic improvements in their cattle and ultimately receive more for their cattle," says Maury Adams, coordinator of electronic cattle

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management for AzTx. "They must make the right decisions and utilize the information to see results."

Information about each animal is stored in a computer database and assigned an eight-digit ID number. That same number is stored on a microchip within the animal's small, circular electronic ear tag.

When the tag is scanned, the animal records for that ID number are accessed by the computer, and new information can be

added. New weight and frame-size measurements are taken to calculate average daily gain (ADG) and an optimum harvest date. Towards the end of the feeding phase, the cattle are sorted and penned according to a determined, optimum harvest date.

"Every animal feeds out differently," Adams says. "Dividing cattle into shipping groups based on an optimal slaughter date is extremely important if a consistent

product is desired. Those producers that ask to ship their cattle all on the same day to slaughter are defeating the purpose of the program."

Adams uses a computer program that contains a database of information on thousands of head of cattle. These cattle serve as a reference to help determine an optimum slaughter date. Adams points out that the computer program best adjusts for average cattle.

"We are working towards a more uniform, consistent product that gives a premium back to the producer at an optimal slaughter date," Adams says. "We want the producer to receive dividends for raising a product that is superior."

The program also is unique because of the hands-on management approach given by Adams. He observes the animals through the entire process. He watches their progress and learns about each set of cattle.

"We believe the combination of my experience and the new technology we are providing can really benefit the producer," Adams says. "I pride myself on getting to know each set of cattle and then setting up the appropriate parameters for sorting the cattle."

Parameters can be based on economic efficiency or an ultimate end product, such as having the cattle meet *Certified Angus Beef*[™] (CAB[®]) criteria.

"I sit down with each producer to learn what their end goals are and what they expect to get out of the program and their cattle," Adams says. "I think it is important that we work together and discuss all management practices."

Getting started

Steve Olson, Olson Cattle Co., Hereford, Texas, was looking for a way to obtain carcass information on his cattle when he learned about AzTx's service.

"I had been wanting to learn more about which bloodlines work and how my cattle stack up against other cattle," Olson says.

That is why he selected AzTx and its EID service to help him obtain more data on his cattle. Olson also purchased a set of cattle to feed alongside his — a control group of sorts.

"I wanted to see if the program would work on all types of cattle, where all of them reach an optimum end point," Olson says.

Upon receiving cattle, AzTx gives each animal an EID ear tag. All of the information collected before that point can



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be linked to that animal and its EID number. That includes an animal's herd ID number and vaccination information.

"The earlier you begin to collect the data, the more beneficial it is to producers," Adams says. "The data that is collected stays with that animal all of the way through the process, and if ownership on an animal changes, the information will always be there."

The animal also receives a sequential ear-tag number to serve as a second ID tool.

The cattle will be worked again 70-100 days before slaughter and receive a growth implant. Also at that time, the cattle will be sorted into slaughter groups. For smaller groups of cattle from one producer, colored ear tags are used to identify slaughter groups.

Currently, AzTx does not ultrasound those cattle enrolled in the program.

"We hope to incorporate ultrasound in the future to aid in determining the best end date for each animal," Adams says. "Until we incorporate that technology, we have a successful system in place that utilizes my past experience."

Throughout the process, the cattle are evaluated for performance. By analyzing the data that has been collected, Adams can identify those animals that are not gaining weight as anticipated.

"We consult the producer before we cull a calf," Adams says. "We cull animals if they are not feeding out right and will not meet our shipping window. It is best just to sell them and at least receive salvage value."

Harvest

Adams accompanies each set of cattle to slaughter. He watches as they are harvested and keeps track of slaughter order, records special characteristics of animals and retrieves EIDs.

"I collect the tags back myself and keep them in order," Adams says. "I also watch to make sure all of the cattle stay in order. That is very important because if one gets out of line it may jeopardize the accuracy of our data."

Before fabrication, Adams records ribeye area (REA), backfat thickness, marbling, yield grade (YG) and other data requested by the producer.

Adams says most of the cattle are sold on a grid to obtain the highest price. The decision of which grid to use is made by each individual producer.

A spreadsheet containing information collected at slaughter is returned to the



Management information collected before arrival at the feedlot can be linked to each animal via its EID number. "The earlier you begin to collect the data, the more beneficial it is to producers," Adams says. "The data that is collected stays with that animal all of the way through the process."

producer. This information can help make decisions about which bulls or cows to continue using in a herd.

"We hope producers utilize this information to sort off the bottom end and improve the standard of what they are producing," Jossierand says. "If they take it back to the cows and bulls they are using in their herds, they will be able to get rid of the genetics that don't produce the top cattle."

Long-run advantages

Adams sees source verification becoming required in the beef industry.

"I think it is going to become even more important, especially as we increase the amount of meat that is sold to foreign countries," Adams says. "Not all countries will require source verification, but a lot of them will. Eventually this will become an issue of trade."

He also sees the system giving the producer more opportunities to sell cattle year-round, not just seasonally.

"The more we learn about each ranch, the easier it is to dissect their calf crop," Adams says. "They can then utilize different management schemes to produce more-efficient and -economical cattle. We want each producer to have the opportunity to produce cattle that fit the mold better year-round."

Adams says the service tries to aid in improving each set of cattle so the producers receive added premiums and

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— Maury Adams

improve the genetic makeup of their herds.

"We will work with whatever we receive, whether the cattle are at the top, middle or bottom in quality," Adams says. "It is our goal to effectively alleviate discounts and work with each producer to get the most for their cattle."

Based on the current interests of packers in source-verified cattle, Adams predicts that packers will be eager to purchase those cattle that have performance information.

"Packers and buyers see the benefit in source-verified cattle," Adams says. "They are eager to know what they are getting, and that comes with an established line of quality based on data that has been collected on an animal. The proof is in the data."

Proof from data is what producers, feedyards, packers and even the consumer will be wanting in the future. For that reason, the days of our grandfathers' approach, although successful, may be past. Source verification and information from EID may be the wave of the future for the beef industry.

