

# Hot-Iron Branding: The Cost & Benefit



PHOTO BY KYNDAL REITZENSTEIN

by **Troy Smith**

**C**attle producers of a certain age probably remember when many cow country businesses distributed calendars featuring the popular “Cowpokes” cartoons, produced by Ace Reid. One of the Western humorist’s memorable drawings depicts a puzzled brand inspector, hat pushed back on his head and tally book in hand. The source of his frustration is the aged bovine beast standing before him.

It’s the brand inspector’s duty to verify ownership of this particular cow, according to the brand she wears. However, the animal appears to have changed ownership more than a few times previously. A multitude of brands adorn her sorry hide, crowded together across shoulder, rib and hip. To say the least, she is a brand inspector’s nightmare.

The cartoon is an exaggeration, of course, but a few old-time brand inspectors may have seen cows that came close. Representatives of the hide and leather industry might look at such a thing and shudder. Multiple and poorly placed brands are a hide merchant’s nightmare, according to Robert Hein, senior vice president and general manager of

National Beef Leather LLC.

At its Saint Joseph, Mo., plant, National Beef Leather processes hides from cattle harvested at National Beef slaughter facilities in Liberal and Dodge City, Kan., plus Brawley, Calif. Raw hides undergo the initial step for processing into leather and are marketed as “wet blue hides.” Many are shipped to Europe, Asia or South America for use in production of furniture, shoes and garments. Hein says roughly half of National Beef Leather’s hides are used for leather upholstery.

“North America produces some of the best hides in the world, making some of the supplest leather. But they’re not the cleanest hides, because of scarring from brands. And leather is judged by the amount of clean, clear surface area available,” Hein explains.

“One large rib brand can take two and a half square feet (of surface area) out of a hide. That’s a big piece of leather,” Hein adds. “With two or three or more brands, 25% to 30% of total hide surface area may be scarred and unusable by some industries, such as for upholstery. Those hides have to go for small

leather products, like purses or wallets.”

Bottom line: Brands devalue hides. For severely damaged hides carrying multiple brands, including rib brands, Hein says 45% to 50% of hide value may be lost. That results in millions of dollars lost to the industry as a whole.

According to the 2005 National Beef Quality Audit, total lost opportunity to the industry due to hide damage from brands averaged about 98¢ per head. Applying that to the 2009 federally inspected steer/heifer slaughter of 26.1 million head suggests a total industry loss of nearly \$26 million.

On a per animal basis, recent discounts for No. 3 hides — those showing the most damage caused primarily by brands — were being marketed \$20 to \$30 per head, compared to the going market rate for Heavy Native Steer hides. From the perspective of leather production, branding is a costly practice.

## **Not all bad**

Of course, others associated with the beef cattle industry view branding as a valuable

tool. That view is most widely touted by cattle producers in western states, where cattle operations tend to be more expansive. Cattle often run in remote locations, and herds belonging to different owners sometimes run in common on public or private lands used by grazing associations. Advocates of branding call it useful, even necessary, for herd identification.

According to the National Animal Health Monitoring Service (NAHMS) 2007-2008 survey report, the percentage of operations using branding as herd identification increases with herd size. That's particularly true in the West, where 82% of all cattle and calves are branded.

"Since it was used in ancient Egypt, to when Spanish explorer Cortez brought domestic cattle bearing his brand to North America, and yet today, branding is the only truly permanent and readily visible form of identification," states Sam Wilson, area supervisor for the New Mexico Livestock Board, which administers that state's brand registry and inspection program. While many states have laws requiring registration of brands and inspection, New Mexico is the only state that makes branding mandatory.

### Alternatives

According to Wilson, radio frequency identification (RFI) technology can be useful, but it's not foolproof. Electronic ear tags are not permanent. They can be lost or removed, as can tags used for visual identification. And while it could be argued that tattoos are permanent, reading them requires animals to be restrained. Properly applied brands are easily seen, often at a distance.

Wilson currently presides over the International Livestock Identification Association (ILIA), an organization of states, provinces and tribal nations where livestock brand recording, and livestock identification through brand inspection is authorized by legislation. Their respective laws vary, Wilson says, but inspection typically is required whenever there is a change of animal ownership, and may be required in situations where livestock are moved to different locations without change of ownership.

The benefits of branding and brand inspection, Wilson says, include identifying animals that have become mixed with those of another owner or owners, and as a deterrent to cattle theft.

"New Mexico requires it, except for purebred seedstock cattle, which may be identified by tattoo, and I think (livestock and brand) boards in other brand law states would prefer that all producers branded," Wilson offers. "Cattle rustling still happens. In fact, cattle theft reports to ILIA are up."

Unlike the movies, where rustlers tried to

spirit away whole herds, Wilson says most thefts involve fewer than 10 head, and often just one or two animals. However, some thieves are bold and ambitious. He cites one report, from a neighboring state, where 30 head went missing. They wore no brands — only common plastic ear tags.

According to Steve Stanec, executive director of the Nebraska Brand Committee, branding and brand inspection provides for recovery of missing animals or their value. In Nebraska's brand inspection area, during the last five fiscal year accountings, routine inspections resulted in recovery of nearly 9,000 head of stray cattle (animals for which ownership was questioned), valued at nearly \$7 million. Nebraska Brand Committee criminal investigators handled approximately 40 cases of cattle theft or fraud involving nearly 20,000 head, valued at well over \$24 million, and more than 70 horses valued at nearly \$44,000. Those investigations and subsequent prosecutions resulted in 17 criminal convictions. Nine cases were closed due to lack of evidence.

"All of the successful convictions were directly related to the ability to properly identify the cattle through the use and documentation of 'permanent' visual methods of branding," Stanec states. "Those cases closed due to lack of evidence are generally attributed to animals being unbranded or unidentifiable, as well as lack of documentation of ownership (brand inspection certificates, bills of sale, etc.). Without the ability to properly identify the animals involved, through permanent, irremovable methods, the successful retrieval of stolen livestock and the successful prosecution would be highly unlikely."

### Is there a compromise?

So here is the dilemma: The practice of branding results in benefit to producers, but also contributes to the discount of total animal value. Whether cost or benefit is greater could be debated long and hard

without resolution. But perhaps there is room for compromise.

National Beef Leather's Robert Hein recognizes the practical application of branding, as well as its cultural significance, but he thinks it's in the entire industry's best interest to minimize hide damage and the associated cost.

"Rib brands are a real value killer, along with multiple brands. Avoiding those would really help, along with using the smallest brand possible. The location causing the least damage is high on the hip," says Hein. "And consider using a freeze brand, which causes less hide damage than a hot-iron brand."

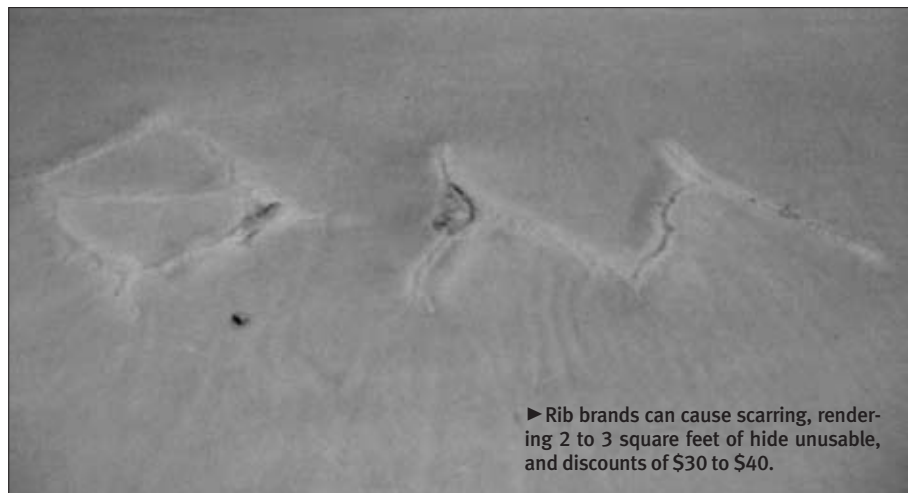
According to Sam Wilson, the number of brands a critter carries still reflects the number of times it has changed ownership. But the industry has evolved to where fewer animals serve as a reminder of the "Cowpokes" cartoon. Generally speaking, cattle probably go through fewer hands than they might have in the past.

"Some producers are trying to avoid branding on the rib. Some have traded their rib brands for other locations. I think a lot of producers are conscious of the hide damage issue," Wilson says.

Some states have stopped registering any new rib brands. Some also have amended brand laws to recognize freeze brands as evidence of ownership. Others have not. Freeze branding is more time-consuming, requires more equipment and is more expensive to administer. It does, however, result in far less scarring of the hide than hot-iron branding.

Wilson says the ILIA encourages research and development of animal identification technology that is practical, cost-effective and will work in synergy with existing identification and inspection legislation.

"We'll do all that we can to help the industry," he states. "At this time, though, branding still is the best protection against theft."



► Rib brands can cause scarring, rendering 2 to 3 square feet of hide unusable, and discounts of \$30 to \$40.

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