United States
Department of
Agriculture

Animal and
Plant Health
Inspection
Service

Veterinary
Services

Animal Identification Practices in Beef Cow/Calf Herds

National Animal Health Monitoring System

Animal identification plays an important role in animal breeding and production systems as well as disease eradication, disease prevention, and food safety. Proper identification is important for identifying herd ownership and pinpointing outstanding or poor performance among individual animals.

According to the USDA's National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS), 60.3 percent of beef cow/calf producers individually identify their cows, and 53.1 percent individually identify their calves. Producers that use individual identification represent 78.5 and 70.2 percent of the cows and calves surveyed in the NAHMS Beef Cow/Calf Health and Productivity Audit (CHAPA).

Animal identification methods were part of the NAHMS study conducted in November and December of 1992 on 799 beef cow/calf operations in 18 of the top beef states.[1] The producers surveyed had at least five cows or heifers and at least 50 percent of their calf crop born in the first 6 months of the year. The 18 states participating represented 70 percent of U.S. beef cow/calf operations.

Individual identification was defined as any number or mark that was unique to that animal. Figure 1 shows that the most common forms of individual identification recorded by producers for calves were plastic eartags (40.8 percent) and brucellosis eartags (21.7 percent). Nearly 56 percent of the calves in the 18 participating states are on operations that use plastic ear tags. Just over 28 percent of the producers reported individually identifying calves within 24 hours of birth. Freeze branding and microchips, more recently developed forms of identification, are not yet widely used by the industry.

Producers use individual identification methods for cows to a similar extent with 45.3 percent of the producers using plastic eartags and 28.3 percent using brucellosis eartags (Figure 2). Just over 61 percent of the cows are on operations where plastic eartags are used for identification.

Figure 1

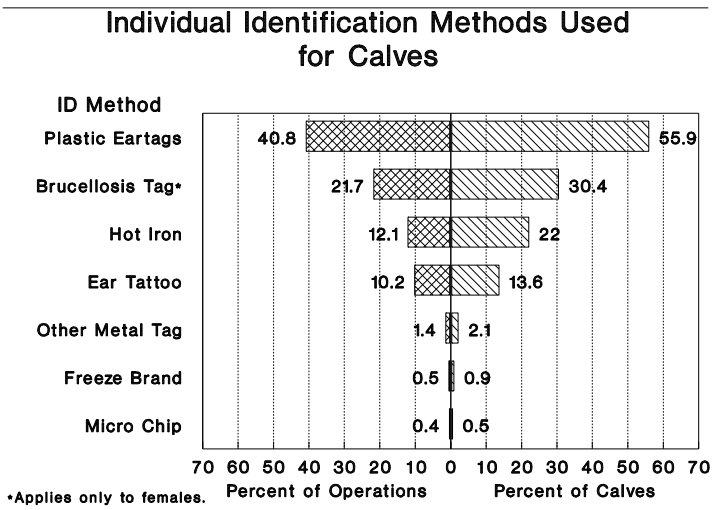
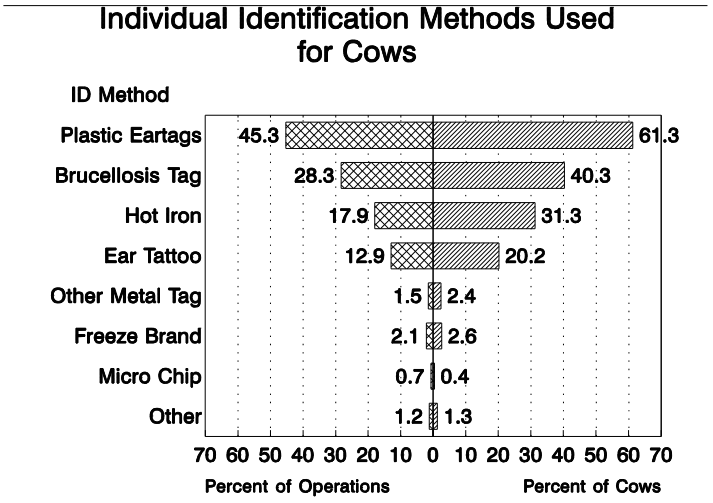


Figure 2



1 Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wyoming.

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Herd identification (all animals in the herd have the same mark or number) may be used either in addition to individual identification or by itself. NAHMS found that 45.7 percent of the producers in the CHAPA states used some form of herd identification. Figure 3 shows that plastic ear tags (27.1 percent) and hot iron brands (21.4 percent) were used most often. However, since large operations use hot iron branding more frequently, the number of animals present on these operations is greater (40.2 percent) than the animals on operations that use plastic ear tags (32.8 percent).

A producer may use multiple identification methods to meet production management needs and identification regulations or to minimize the chance of losing an animal's identification. Figure 4 shows that 23.9, 31.1, and 15.7 percent of the producers use two or more forms of identification for calves, cows, and the herd, respectively.

The number of producers using individual and herd identification tends to vary by herd size. Figure 5 indicates that as herds get larger, producers are more likely to use forms of individual and herd identification.

NAHMS collaborators included the National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA), State and Federal Veterinary Medical Officers, and the National Veterinary Services Laboratories (USDA:APHIS:VS).

Other CHAPA information is available on the following topics: Branding, Injection sites, Facilities, Calf health, and Reproductive efficiency. For more information, contact:

Centers for Epidemiology & Animal Health
USDA:APHIS:VS, Attn. NAHMS
555 South Howes
Fort Collins, Colorado 80521
(970) 490-7800 Internet:
NAHMS_INFO@aphis.usda.gov

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Figure 3

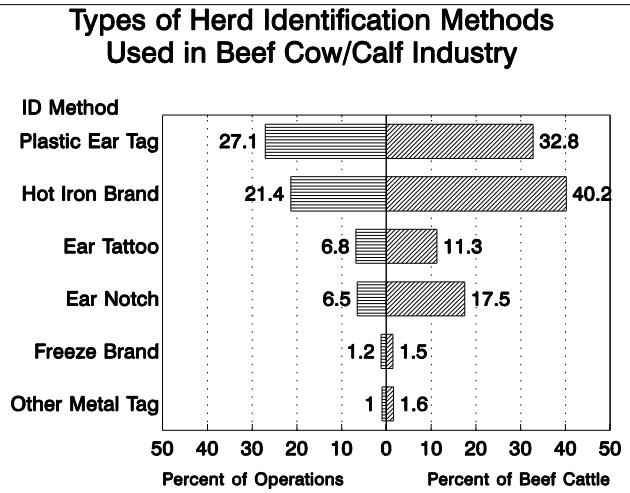

Figure 4

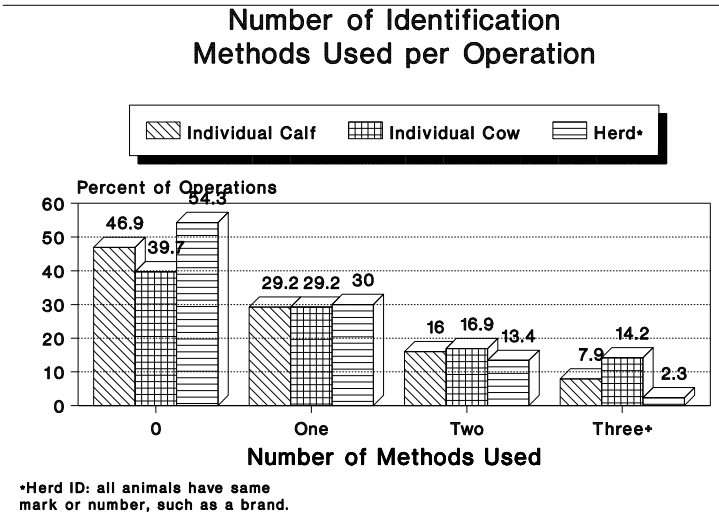
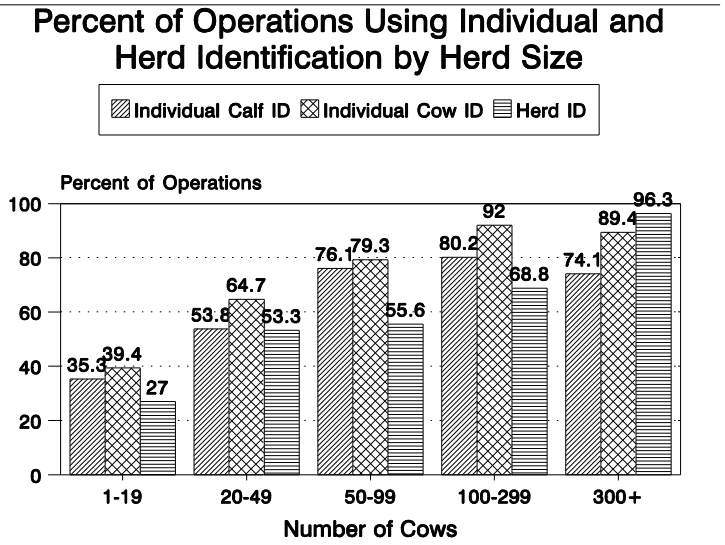
Figure 5