



# Beef Cattle Identification

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Identification of cattle is needed for any type of record system. Cattle records may range from a simple inventory list of cattle to calving records or performance records.

The two components of a cattle identification system are the numbering system and the method of marking or numbering cattle.

## Numbering Systems

Various numbering systems have been developed for use with cattle. The numbering system must provide unique and positive identification for each animal in the herd. Several common systems in use will be discussed.

### System One

This system utilizes a three- or four-digit number for each animal. The first number represents the year of birth. The remaining numbers represent the individual animal's own number.

221 or 2021

2 = year of birth, 2012

21 or 021 = individual animal's  
number

With this system all calves born in 2010 or in the 2010 calf crop season would have numbers starting with 0 (i.e., 001, 002, 003, etc., or 0001, 0002, 0003, etc.). Following this system, 2011 calf numbers would start at 101 (or 1001) and 2012 calves would be 201 or 2001. Usually these

numbers are assigned in order as the calves are born. In some herds, calves are caught periodically, assigned numbers and tagged. The three-digit system will handle up to 99 calves in a year or calf crop season. The four-digit system will handle up to 999 calves.

Alternatively, the last digit or the last two digits may represent the year, and the first two or three digits would indicate the calf's own number. For example, 5609 (or 569) would be the 56th calf born in 2009 in this system.

### System Two

System two is similar to the first system and is used by Brahman and Brahman-based breeds. The animal number is branded above the year of birth or written with a dash or a slash. In this example, 21 is the animal number and 2 is the year of birth.

21

2 or 21/2 or 21-2

### System Three

This system is used by some British and European breeds. It is similar to the first two systems. The main difference is the year of birth is represented by a letter.

Y21, Y021, 21Y or 021Y

Y represents year of birth, 2012

21 or 021 represents the calf's  
number

The various breed associations designate the series of letters to be used as year codes.

**Year Letter Codes**  
**Letter = Year of Birth**  
(I, O, Q and Z are not used.)

K=2000	V=2009	F=2018
L=2001	W=2010	G=2019
M=2002	X=2011	H=2020
N=2003	Y=2012	J=2021
P=2004	A=2013	K=2022
R=2005	B=2014	L=2023
S=2006	C=2015	M=2024
T=2007	D=2016	N=2025
U=2008	E=2017	P=2026

### System Four

This system assigns consecutive numbers to animals in the herd. When 99 or 999 or a pre-determined number is reached, then the numbers can be restarted at 1.

An advantage of systems one, two and three is the year of birth is part of the animal's number. Knowing this, then the age of an animal or its year of birth can be determined by its number. This is more easily done with systems one, two and three. With system four, animal age is not available from the animal number.

In some cases, a heifer may be assigned the same number as a cow already in the herd, for example, heifer 221 (born in 2012) and cow 221 (born in 2002). This should not cause any problems since there is a 10-year age spread between the two that should be readily apparent in the field. Also, by the time heifer 221 has her first calf as a 2- or 3-year-old, cow 221 will be 12 or 13 years old and probably gone from the herd.

### Marking Cattle

Marking cattle for identification should involve methods that are easy to read at a distance, are easy to apply and are permanent.

None of the individual marking methods meet all of these criteria. For this reason, the use of two marking methods on an animal is strongly recommended.

The most common methods of marking cattle are ear tags, tattoos and hot brands. Less common methods of marking cattle include freeze brands, ear notches, neck chains and horn brands.

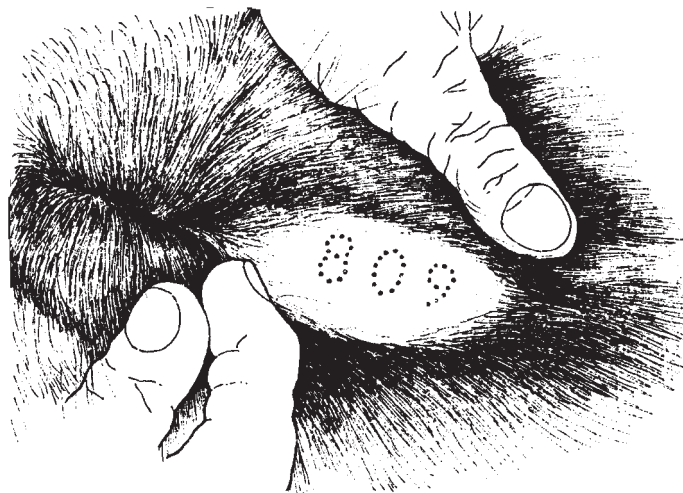
Ear tags (Fig. 1) are a popular method of identifying cattle. The larger type tags are easy to apply and are easy to read out in the pasture. The biggest problem with ear tags is loss of tags. Loss of tags may range from less than 10 percent up to 20 percent on an annual basis. However, many cattle will carry a tag for years before it is lost.



**FIGURE 1.** Examples of two numbering systems that can be used on ear tags. The white bull in the back is the 56th calf born in 2009 whereas the crossbred cow in the front is the second calf from the 2005 calf crop. The cow was born into the herd while the bull was purchased from another breeder.

Loss of tags is probably more related to type of pastures the cattle are running and tagging technique. A cattleman should try several brands of tags until he finds one that suits his needs and provides satisfactory results.

Ear tattoos (Fig. 2) are easy to apply and are permanent. Good readable tattoos are dependent on good tattooing techniques.



**FIGURE 2.** Ear tattoo for calf 809.



**FIGURE 3.** The brand on this bull indicates he is the 56th calf from the 2009 calf crop. Using two systems of identification ensures that if the ear tag is lost, the bull can still be identified.

A combination of ear tags and tattoos are used by many cattlemen. The ear tag features easy reading while the tattoo is permanent. In many cases, an animal with a lost tag can have its tattoo read in the head gate and have a blank tag numbered and applied in one operation.

Brands (Fig. 3) (either hot or freeze) are permanent and are usually easy to read in the pasture. Readability of brands is dependent on good branding technique, good irons and practice. Readability of brands can be poor in the winter and spring when winter hair coats may be long enough to partially or completely cover a brand. Hot brands and freeze brands should be small (3-inch to 4-inch high numbers and letters) and simple. They should also be placed in the shoulder, hip or butt area. Large side (rib area) brands cause too much hide damage and lower market value of the animal.

Ear notches have been used by some cattlemen. Notches are permanent. They can be difficult to read without practice and are not used by many cattlemen.

Neck chains and ropes are used by some breeders of polled cattle. These are used very little because of expense, loss of chains or ropes and the chances of animals getting caught on objects around the farm.

Horn brands are used by some breeders of horned cattle. Brands have to be reapplied on growing animals. Also, this type brand is small and not readable at a distance.

## The Identification System

To establish an identification system for the herd, first select a numbering system. Either system one or two should prove more than adequate for most cattle operations in the state.

The next step is to select two marking systems to use on the herd. Two methods of marking cattle should always be used. With two methods used on an animal, identification can be maintained if one of the marking methods should fail. The most reliable combinations to use are tattoo and ear tag, or tattoo and brand.

Purebred breeders are required by their breed association to identify cattle for registration. The association will also specify the marking system. For the purebred breeder, one only needs to pick a backup marking system.

Occasionally, a breeder may use an extra marking system. This is done to ensure that animal identity is always maintained. Workable combinations are double ear tags and tattoos, and ear tag, tattoo and brand.

## Herd Identification Tips

1. Make the first number assigned to a calf its permanent herd number. In other words, do not assign a number to a calf at birth and then assign that calf another number when it enters

the herd as a replacement animal. Using a double number system complicates and adds to the records kept on a herd. Also, in some herds records can be lost when an animal's herd number and calf number cannot be matched up.

2. When an identification system is being set up on a commercial herd, the question of how to number cows already in the herd arises. The simplest method is to number and identify these cows as X-1 through X-\_\_. The "X" would denote cows in the herd when the number system was established. In some instances, the year of birth can be closely estimated on some cattle. If this can be done, then assign those cattle a number that will indicate their year of birth.
3. When setting up a system on a purebred herd, numbering systems one or two will work well. In a purebred herd the number will be part of the animal's registered name (i.e., Sport 8001 or Sport 1/8). Cows and heifers assembled to start a purebred herd can use whatever number was assigned to them in their original herd. Calves from these cows and heifers will then be numbered according to the system selected for the herd.
4. Order ear tags well ahead of the calving season and keep a supply of blank tags on hand for replacing lost tags. Use a tag marking pen on blank tags. This will give a longer lasting mark than regular markers.
5. Three-digit tags (i.e., 201-299) are most often seen in catalogs and livestock supply stores. Most ear tag companies make four-digit tags and custom tags. These can be ordered from tag companies by your livestock equipment supplier.
6. Replace missing tags on a regular basis. Don't wait until so many tags are missing that identification of individual animals becomes a problem.

## Summary

Identification of cattle is needed for any type of herd record system. Select a numbering system that is simple to use and understand. Use a combination of marking methods that are easy to read and permanent.

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Acknowledgment is given to DR. ROBERT J. FELSMAN, former Extension livestock management specialist, Cooperative Extension Program, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, as the original author of this manuscript.

Printed by University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service Printing Services.

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