

Cattle Business in Mississippi – September 2016
“Beef Production Strategies” article
Tagging Strategies

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I love this time of year. Every morning I anticipate getting texts from my parents or in-laws about new calves that were born on the farm. Usually the texts are pretty simple with a cow tag, calf sex, and birth weight. They will generally read something like: 1574 – Bull, 82 lbs. It works well for me because I will have a date stamp and an additional record of the calf's data. Identifying the calves at birth with an ear tag allows producers to track calf performance, maintain individual records, and make weaning easier.

I have spent quite a bit of time during my career working with ear tags. From managing a tens of thousands of EID tags in Kentucky to managing tag allocation for the beef shows in Alabama – tags have become my thing. For our operations, tags are used to track who belongs to who. It helps with culling decisions, rotating pastures, and keeping track of performance/pedigrees. Perhaps the simplest way to tag calves is the method my parents employ - tagging with their dam's id and re-tagging with permanent id at weaning all calves receive the same color tag in left ear. Simple, yet effective.

My in-laws, on the other hand, have a complex tagging system where all calves receive their unique, lifetime, herd id at birth. Each calf receives a 4 digit id comprised of letters and numbers. Their herd can be traced back to 20 cows, so each cow family is assigned a letter – this serves as the first letter in the calf's id. Calves are then identified numerically. The last character of the calf's id will be the international letter code for year (see figure 1). For example the 16th calf of 2016 was M16D. In addition to knowing birth order and year of birth, we know that all animals in the 'M' family are descendants of Mindy, a Simmental cow my wife showed in 1998. When the 100th calf is born the 'family' letter moves to the second position. Calf 100 and 101 were 0F0D and 0L1D, respectively. Very complex, but very effective – for their system.

For many commercial operations, utilizing different color tags, can be beneficial. I worked for a farm that tagged AI sired bull calves with blue tags, AI sired heifers with pink tags, and all clean-up bull sired calves with green tags. I have also seen producers tag steers in the right ear and heifers in the left, or vice versa. Many farms will also notch tags for herd group, or if the calf was treated with antibiotics or vaccinated. Alternating ears and/or tag colors make sorting calves a breeze.

There are many ways identify calves; finding which one serves your operation best can be a work in progress. By assigning identification to each cow in the herd and matching calves to dams and birthdates, producers can monitor cow reproductive efficiency. Producers should also consider incorporating a form of permanent id, like ear tattoos or brands, in their management systems to serve as a backup for the inevitable lost tag. Good luck with fall calves!

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For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service or visit extension.msstate.edu.

Figure 1: International Letter Code System, where the calf birth year is represented by a designated letter.

X = 2010	C = 2015	H = 2020	N = 2025
Y = 2011	D = 2016	J = 2021	P = 2026
Z = 2012	E = 2017	K = 2022	R = 2027
A = 2013	F = 2018	L = 2023	S = 2028
B = 2014	G = 2019	M = 2024	T = 2029