

Beef: identification and registration of animals and labelling of beef

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PURPOSE: to present a report to the Council and Parliament concerning the possibility of introduction of electronic identification for bovine animals.

CONTENT: Bovine animals are identified according to Regulation 1760/2000/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 July 2000 establishing a system for the identification and registration of bovine animals and labelling of beef and beef products and repealing Council Regulation 820/97/EC. This system includes the elements "double ear-tag", "holding register", "cattle-passport" and "computerised database".

According to the aforementioned Regulation, the Commission was required to examine, on the basis of work performed by the Joint Research Centre, the feasibility of using electronic means for the identification of animals. The European Parliament and the Council, acting on the basis of a report from the Commission, are invited to consider the possibility of introducing electronic identification arrangements in the light of progress achieved in this field.

In 1998 the Commission launched a large-scale research project on livestock electronic identification (IDEA). The final report was presented in April 2002 and necessary clarifications were made in July 2002. This project has demonstrated that in principle, the use of electronic identifiers can deliver a substantial improvement in animal identification systems provided a number of conditions concerning the accompanying measures are fulfilled. The conclusions of this project allow recommendations to be made on technical issues and conclusions concerning the conditions of introducing electronic identification arrangements for bovine animals in the EU.

The purpose of this report is to summarise the experience gained on the basis of the IDEA project on the use of electronic identification in bovine animals and to draw conclusions concerning the conditions of introducing electronic identification arrangements for bovine animals in the European Union. It focuses mainly on the results of the IDEA-project but also considers experiences with the existing system.

The main conclusion of the report is that electronic identification can contribute to improvements in existing systems of cattle identification. For example, electronic identifiers allow a faster reading and a higher reading accuracy than classical ear-tags. Dynamic reading and direct entry of data into databases is also possible (removing potential errors caused by inaccurate manual database entry). This could in particular ease the procedure to report the movements of animals to the database. However the contribution of electronic identification to improve animal identification and traceability should not be overestimated in view of the nature of difficulties in applying existing systems. Complete tagging of all animals and an efficient data management are preconditions for any system of identification, irrespective of whether electronic identifiers or classic ear-tags are used.

The introduction of electronic identification should be considered in the light of its technical feasibility and its capability to improve the existing system of bovine identification. It has been demonstrated that the technology has been developed to the extent that it can be applied. Electronic identification can improve the existing system of identification and registration in certain ways. It can, for example, contribute to a higher accuracy in holding registers, allow instantaneous inputs into central databases and ensure records

are continually maintained and updated provided that the current system of identification and registration based on classical ear-tags is well established. Otherwise the benefits of electronic identification would not be achieved.

To decide on the possibility of introducing electronic identification systems on a Community wide basis, the following general conditions for the identification and registration of bovine animals would have to be considered:

- Organisational structures and data management systems have to be well established;
- Animals would have to be identified at any time by (at least) two identifiers, where one must be a 'visual' ear-tag and the second can be an electronic identifier;
- According to present knowledge the requirement of tagging within a period not longer than 20 days after birth limits the use of the bolus in view of the maturation of the fore-stomachs of the calf;
- Each type of identifier has to be kept out of the food chain, which would limit the use of the injectable transponder due to its reduced recovery rate;
- The additional costs for electronic identification need to be considered in relation to its increased accuracy.