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RFID in the Global Cattle Industry

Using RFID in the cattle industry is far from a new idea. Texas Instruments, one of the largest manufacturers of RFID transponders, got into the RFID business after being asked to develop a chip suitable for a cattle-tracking trial in Holland back in 1989. An estimated 30 million head of cattle have been

tagged worldwide over the past 15 years. But that number pales when one considers that the United States alone has a population of 98 million head. There are about 1 billion head of cattle worldwide.



The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has approved standards for animal RFID tags, and the technology has improved in recent years. Adoption is picking up in Europe, Australia and Canada. Sales of animal RFID tags worldwide this year are expected to reach \$37 million. The market is expected to grow at a compound annual rate of nearly 30 percent over the next four years.

Some ranchers have tagged cows to make it easier to track them, but the use of RFID has often been driven by concerns about mad cow and other diseases. Canada introduced a mandatory tracking system using bar codes after it was hit with a case of mad cow disease in December 1993. But the system required a lot of manpower to scan the bar codes, which often got damaged or covered in mud.

Last September, Canada announced that it would scrap the bar

code system; in January 2005, it will begin requiring a rancher to put RFID tags on cattle as they leave the farm where they were born. The Canadian Cattle Identification Agency, a nonprofit industry initiative, will manage the database of information about the tagged animals.

Australia's National Livestock Information Scheme has approved RFID tags and readers for use by Australian beef producers. The mandatory system, which was expected to be deployed nationwide by midyear, will be operated by Meat & Livestock Australia, an organization made up of cattle owners and beef producers.

Cattle tagging is being explored by a number of European countries. In Spain, for example, 2,500 cattle farmers in the largest farmers' association in the European Union are using RFID to track 300,000 animals as part of a trial. There hasn't been any move toward mandating RFID tagging of cattle in the EU. But member countries are talking about implementing RFID and potentially moving toward mandating it across the EU, according to Tony McDougal, spokesman for the U.K.'s Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in London.

Part of the reason Europe has not rushed to adopt RFID is that there is already extensive data collection and tracking of individual animals without RFID because of actions taken in response to outbreaks of diseases among member countries. For example, the United Kingdom has operated a cattle-tracking system since 1998. It uses a bar-coded ear tag on the animal. Each ear tag has a unique number that is duplicated on a "cattle passport"—a paper document that has information needed to identify an animal and that lists the movements of that particular animal. The passport remains with the animal throughout its life.



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