

Record Keeping and On-Farm Animal Identification

Maintaining performance records for your flock is one of the best management tools you can use to increase the efficiency of your operation. Such factors as ram performance, weaning weights, lambing percentage, and death losses have a direct effect on the income and profitability of your flock. All producers should try to maintain some form of record keeping system. A very simple form of record keeping is to keep track of the number of ewes exposed to ram(s), the number of lambs born from those ewes, and the number of lambs weaned. Monitoring even these very basic statistics will give a producer an idea of flock productivity. Producers interested in making serious gains in productivity, however, will want to develop a record keeping system to track the performance of individual animals. Maintaining records helps producers pinpoint areas of weakness in the overall flock performance, which will help when making decisions about flock management, the selection of new breeding stock and culling low performing animals. There are extensive computer management programs, such as Ewebyte, that are designed for use on sheep farms.

Another major advantage of individually identifying stock is being able to track animals that have been treated with medication. This helps ensure that animals are not shipped for slaughter before medication withdrawal times have been met and helps improve the efficiency of medication administration. Improved timing and tracking of medication use could potentially save on medication costs and decrease the likelihood of developing resistant strains of bacteria on your farm.

Maintaining records regarding medical histories of individual animals can also be used when making culling decisions. For example, a ewe may have a tendency to prolapse while she is heavily pregnant but appear fine after lambing. As culling most likely won't occur until after weaning, this information may be forgotten if not recorded.

Currently, many producers have some method of on-farm identification. Many use a 'permanent' system of identification, such as ear tags or tattoos, and/or a temporary system, such as livestock markers. Some producers use a combination of methods (e.g. permanently tagging breeding stock and use temporary methods as needed for market lambs etc.). The sections below describe some of the more common means of identifying animals.

Identification Methods:

Tattooing

In order to register purebred sheep in Canada, you must tattoo your animals with a unique identification. Some producers of commercial sheep may also prefer tattooing rather than ear tags, as tags may be lost. For registered purebred sheep the identification must include three components: farm flock letters, animal identification, and the year letter. Registered flock letters are obtained from the Canadian Livestock Records Corporation (CLRC) in Ottawa. All purebred animals on the farm will be given the same flock letters. Producers assign individual animals a number that is unique within the flock. All animals born within the same year are assigned a year letter. All flocks use the same year letter. A typical purebred identification is as follows: TAG 25G

TAG	25	G
(flock letters)	(animal number -unique within the flock)	year letter (born in 1997)

Flock letters are tattooed in the right ear of the sheep, and the animal number and year letter are tattooed in the left ear

Tattoo Year Letters

Letters that could be difficult to read or misinterpreted as a number are not used for year letters (i.e. 'I', 'O', 'Q', and 'V' are not used)

Y 1989	G 1997	R 2005	A 2013
Z 1990	H 1998	S 2006	B 2014
A 1991	J 1999	T 2007	C 2015
B 1992	K 2000	U 2008	D 2016
C 1993	L 2001	W 2009	E 2017
D 1994	M 2002	X 2010	F 2018
E 1995	N 2003	Y 2011	G 2019
F 1996	P 2004	Z 2012	H 2020

To tattoo sheep you need tattooing pliers, a double set of numbers (0 to 9), the current year letter, and your flock letters. Pliers can generally be purchased at feed stores and farm equipment stores. There are two basic types of pliers: a revolving head model (one set of symbols on either side of a pivoting head) and single pliers (one set of symbols on stationary head). With the revolving head model, you can place the flock letters on one side of the plier head and the animal number and year letter on the other side. These pliers are convenient as you can do one animal without having to stopping to change symbols. However, you must be careful to keep the revolving head snugly in place or the pliers will twist during tattooing, resulting in a poor tattoo. If you use single pliers it is most convenient to have two sets. This allows you to leave the flock letters in one set and use the other set for the animal number and year letter. For purebred registration, lambs must be tattooed by four months of age. Very small tattoo pliers are available for tattooing very young lambs (one to two weeks of age). The tattoo will grow with the ear as the lamb grows.

Procedure for Tattooing:

1. The inside of the ears should be wiped free of dirt, grease, and wax before tattooing.
 2. Insert the required letters and/or numbers in the jaws of the pliers and lock into position.
 3. Check the correctness of the symbols by making an imprint on a piece of paper or corrugated cardboard. It is quite easy to reverse symbols, resulting in difficult to read tattoos. Remember, your mistakes will be permanent.
 4. Secure the animal so that unnecessary movement is avoided. It is advisable to have an assistant. Animals can be turned on their rump or held in a chute to facilitate handling.
 5. Smear the ink or paste on the area to be tattooed. Black or green ink will work well for white-eared animal. Green ink is most legible for black or dark-eared animals. Using paste rather than ink results in a clearer and longer lasting tattoo.
 6. The tattoo should be placed between the main veins of the ear. Make the imprint with a quick firm movement. Extreme pressure is not needed.
 7. Withdrawal the pliers and immediately apply ink to the tattoo. Vigorously rub the area with a brush or your thumb and forefinger continuously for at least 15 seconds. This is an important step in achieving a clear tattoo.
 8. Some bleeding may occur. If so, continue to rub tattoo paste or ink into the area. Tattoo paste and ink have antiseptic qualities.
 9. After tattooing is complete, remove excess pigment from the pliers and symbols by scrubbing them in warm, soapy water with a stiff-bristle brush and dry. Immerse the equipment in rubbing alcohol, replace to their containers, and store in a clean, secure location.
 10. Do not disturb the tattooed area until healing is complete. This may be from 5-21 days depending on the age and breed of the animal.
- Tip: In a dimly lit area, hold a flashlight behind the tattoo to read the numbers for dark-eared animals.

Ear Tags

Ear tags can be purchased in a variety of shapes and sizes. Small, aluminum 'curl-lock' tags and various types of plastic tags are often used for sheep. Tags can be purchased at most feed and/or farm equipment stores. You will also need a set of tagging pliers suitable for the type of tag you've purchased. Be sure to buy tags that are specifically designed for sheep. Cattle tags look similar, but are generally much larger.

Advantages of using aluminum tags are that they are inexpensive and are rarely lost from the ear. The major disadvantage of these tags is that they are small and it is usually necessary to catch the animal to read the tag. This type of tag may become embedded in the ear if not applied properly. It is important when tagging lambs to place the tag near the outside of the ear. This allows room for the ear to grow. If the tag restricts the growth of the ear it may cause an infection. Aluminum tags can be purchased in two sizes. There are very small lamb tags that may be used in newborn lambs for initial identification. They are placed in the ear shortly after birth or within the first two days of life. At three or four month of age the producer will decide which animals will be kept as breeding stock. At that point lamb tags are often removed, as the ear has outgrown the tag. Larger aluminum tags are available for older animals.

Plastic tags are also widely used for identification. The plastic tags are easier to read without catching the animals and are available in assorted colours. They can be purchased pre-stamped with numbers or blank, to be labelled as needed. The disadvantage of using plastic tags is that, depending on their design, they may have a relatively high rate of loss. As with the aluminum tags take care to allow for ear growth when using plastic curl-lock tags. If possible when replacing tags, use the same hole that was made by the original tag.

To offset the advantages and disadvantages of the different types of tags, some producers double tag their animals, using a plastic tag in one ear for easy recognition and placing an aluminum tag or tattoo in the other ear for security if the plastic tag is lost.

Producers may use various methods of tagging to assist them in recognizing different groups of sheep at a glance. As plastic tags come in different colours, each colour can be used to distinguish between different birth years, different breeds, commercial versus purebred animals, or male versus female. Tags in the right or left ears may also be used to define a particular group (e.g. right ear tagged for females and the left ear for males). Other producers may use different series of numbers for various characteristics. These tagging schemes should be designed to help make sorting and identifying sheep easier in the particular farming operation.

Ear Notching

Some producers may wish to ear-notching lambs at birth. Ear notching involves punching small holes along the sides of the ears at specific locations based on a coding system. There is a universal coding system that may be used, or the system can be tailored to suit the needs of the individual farm. This is a permanent identification system, which also means that the mistakes will also be permanent. Theoretically, animals do not have to be caught to read the identification. However, it takes practice to read the notches quickly.



Tag applicator and tags

Paint Branding and Livestock Markers

Rather than tagging newborn lambs, some producers prefer to paint brand lambs at birth. Lambs are often paint branded with the same number as their mother. This allows for easy matching of ewes with their lambs. Branding irons with the numbers 0-9 are available for dipping in scubbable paint for this purpose. The paint brand can last up to 12 months under ideal circumstances. Scubbable paint in spray cans is also available.

Crayon livestock markers are available for short-term animal identification. For example, if a few lambs in a pen were treated with antibiotics the producer may use a marker to visually identify those lambs.

When using livestock paints or markers only use non-toxic materials intended for use on livestock. As well as causing possible health problems for the sheep, using inappropriate materials can be a food safety issue. These materials should also be scubbable (removable from the fleece). Place the marker in the head or neck of the animals rather than the back or loin area when using markers or paint on animals near the time they will be shipped for slaughter.