



Pilot Herd Case Study

Steve Wickingson's beef operation is situated on a farmstead that originated in 1878. Once a dairy farm owned by his grandparents, Steve took over and transitioned the 197-acre farm into a retained ownership cow-calf operation in 1997. He started with a small herd of 12 cows composed of four Beefalo, three Simmental, and five Angus.

Over time, Steve expanded his farm and herd, and in doing so, also changed the breeds he's incorporated. Steve currently works with Angus and a few Saler, and his herd includes 70 brood cows, 88 feedlot calves, and three bulls.

In addition to the farm's original acreage, Steve purchased a 125 acre neighboring farm in 2005. Running his herd on pasture year round, Steve reserves approximately 128 acres for pasture on his own land. He rents another 40 acres, of which 25 acres are devoted to pasture. Steve aims for seasonal calving, primarily around the middle of April. Calves are fenceline weaned in the fall and transition from grass to dry hay and some corn before being introduced to a feedlot ration.



Besides running the farm, Steve and his wife, Lorri, have both worked outside jobs while their son Michael and daughter Kayla attend college. Steve runs the cattle almost completely by himself with additional help from Michael during his visits. The cropland is managed by Steve, but he hires out some custom work during planting and harvesting. Except for the wet distiller's grains Steve has included in his cattle's diet, all of the feed supplied to the animals is home grown—whether on his own land or the additional acreage.

Premises Registration

Steve learned about premises registration through an article in the *Wisconsin State Farmer* and registered his premises online prior to the Premises Registration Act that took effect in 2006. He continues to renew his premises, as required.

Steve maintains a mostly-closed herd and sells cattle privately and at the Equity barn. The only cattle from outside the herd that Steve commingles with his own are the bulls, which are purchased from Woodhill Farms in Viroqua, Wis. and MacDonald Ranches in Bismarck, N.D.

Identification System

Before implementing RFID technology, Steve relied on a small black notebook to keep track of records. "This was a hard copy of when calves were born and other important dates," explained Steve. However, in the past he also has had to provide affidavits of his feeding program and COOL-related paperwork upon sale of his animals to processors.

"If you can document the growth process, there is a value added demand. You have to cater to the customer, and there are customers that demand RFID because they want source documented beef."

*— Steve Wickingson,
Ste-Lor Oaks Beef
Owner/ Operator*

Top 3 advantages of current system

1. Positive and clear identification

2. Accurate and organized records

3. Added value

As part of the pilot program, Steve received the first batch of RFID tags through WLIC. He currently buys his RFID tags and corresponding visual tags through Coburn Company, Inc. in Whitewater, Wis. He tagged the cattle as they calved. Steve reroutes them through his handling system to tag them, then sends them out to pasture. The majority of calves were tagged at birth in the dry lot and those that weren't were tagged when chute work for vaccinations was needed.

Equipped with both a handheld computer and reader, Steve has shifted his record system to an electronic version, using Farm Works® software. This software provides unlimited technical support and software updates. After participating in a three-day Farm Works training class, Steve has a strong understanding of the software and finds it easy to keep track of his calves' birth dates and various other cattle records, as well as his accounting and crop management records.

Values Gained

•**Efficiency** – As a result of RFID technology, the cattle spend less time in the chute. Using the reader, Steve can gather weights, birthdates and breeding information while chute side. “The goal of any chute work is to capture all of the information while making sure the animal is as stress-free as possible,” said Steve, who also finds the wand very helpful when separating his cattle by identifying them in a group when he cannot visually read their tags.

•**Accuracy** - Due to his large herd size, it is sometimes difficult to visually identify Steve's cattle for sorting and record-keeping. “My cows are hard on tags,” said Steve. “RFID tags have allowed me to positively identify those cattle that lose their visual tags and have improved the accuracy of my recordkeeping system.” Besides his own records, Steve also finds benefits in future use of RFID technology at meat

processing plants. “I would love to get the data back on these cattle as soon as they are processed and with these large scanners in place, I believe this will be possible in the near future.” Receiving records back on his animals' carcass weights, yield, and grade information will give Steve more information to adjust his culling system at the farm and eventually process a better product.

•**Added Value** - Many of Steve's cattle are bought privately, and the relationship he has built with these buyers is a significant part of their loyalty. “You're starting to see it everywhere,” said Steve. “There are customers that demand to know where their food comes from and the processes used to raise them.”

For this reason, Steve believes that as the public learns more about RFID and its ability to trace animals back to their farm of origin, greater demand for this identification will occur. Though he is not receiving higher prices for



his animals yet, Steve believes it's only a matter of time. “I foresee a niche market for source-documented, all-natural, owner-retained beef,” said Steve.

Future Outlook

While Steve is still tailoring the RFID technology to his management program, he doesn't hesitate to recommend its use to other producers. Steve believes that mandatory animal identification is not far away. “The question is, do you want to voluntarily do this and set it up while you have time to tweak it or to you want to be made to participate?” asked Steve.

As for his own farm, Steve would like to expand to around 100 head of cattle and upgrade his facilities. “Right now our lanes are inadequate for that many cattle, and I run the farm a lot of the time by myself,” said Steve. As RFID plays a more consistent role in his day-to-day routine on the farm, Steve hopes it will lessen his work load and provide better returns in the end.

