

West magazine
Branding –
By Bruce Masterman

It seems every branding attracts a queasy greenhorn who invariably asks “Doesn’t that hurt?” as the brand burns into a calf’s hide.

Well, in a word, yes, it does.

But for most Western Canadian ranchers, hot iron branding remains the best way to permanently mark their four-legged assets for future identification.

“We know that it’s painful,” says Dr. Alan Bergen, a veterinarian from Medicine Hat, Alberta.

“In terms of property identification, it is good, but it is a shame we need to protect our cows from rustling this way.”

Bergen is a member of the animal welfare committee of the Canadian Veterinary Medicine Association. His committee has penned many papers about ethical and safe treatment of animals, but not the branding issue.

“I can see both sides,” says Bergen. “But branding is so efficient.”

He notes there are alternatives –including ear tattoos, ear tags and computer chip implants – but they are only effective as long as the head remains. If a rustler removed the head, the theft could never be proven.

Bergen says ranchers should guard against branding too often in order to cut down on the amount of pain an animal endures. An animal that is sold usually is rebranded, sometimes more than once.

Government regulations can add to the pain, including a requirement that calves being shipped to the U.S. for feeding must have a brand showing Canada as the country of origin.

Freeze branding is another option, but so far it’s used mainly with horses and purebred cattle.

The “irons” are made of stainless steel, brass, copper or bronze. They are frozen using dry ice.

But the process isn’t regarded as a viable option when hundreds of cattle need branding. It’s costlier, takes more time and is harder to perfect than hot-iron branding.

“Guys branding 400 to 500 head would be there for days and days,” says Cam Camden, an Alberta rancher and assistant manager of the province’s Livestock Identification Services.

A joint study by the University of Saskatchewan’s department of herd medicine and the Western College of Veterinary Medicine in Saskatoon showed that hot-iron branding causes more tissue damage and “perhaps more discomfort” than the freeze method.

Another study by the university and Agriculture Canada’s Lennoxville Research Centre in Quebec indicated both branding methods caused discomfort in yearling heifers. Hot branding, however, was shown to cause a “greater acute response” when the animals were touched on their branded hide.

In the U.S., customers influenced by the animal rights lobby have brought pressure on chain restaurants to require their suppliers to adhere to certain standards, including one requiring that beef come from animals that weren't branded.

American ranchers have slammed the anti-branding action, with one rancher summing up the majority feeling: "They apparently haven't heard about cattle theft."

Perhaps as a preemptive move against similar actions here, Canadian ranchers are taking steps to make branding easier on their cattle.

Dr. David Dempsey, a veterinarian in High River, Alberta, says many ranchers are starting to paint on aloe vera ointment – which they buy by the tub-full at local farm equipment dealerships – to help ease the pain and promote healing of branded hides.

Some ranchers also inject non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs to reduce the pain, Dempsey adds.

He believes a calf being temporarily separated from its mother, and then being wrestled to the ground or in a squeeze gate, is probably more traumatic than the actual branding. Dempsey likens it to a person receiving a serious but small burn, and then continuing a normal daily routine.

"This is a quick procedure on less than one percent of a calf's body surface," he says.

"Sure it hurts, but those calves are back nursing within seconds as if nothing happened."