

The Farm Connection

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Preparing for Traceability

With customers becoming more interested in tracking a beef product from the farm to the grocery store, [Ontario Corn Fed Beef Inc.](#) is developing a simple traceability system that could also help producers add value to the product.



“We are working towards the day when a plant or retailer says to us, ‘We want Ontario Corn Fed Beef, but we want more information on the cattle from the time they were born.’ And we would have a system in place at a significant number of feedlots so that we could provide that information electronically,” says Dave Murray, quality compliance manager for Ontario Corn Fed Beef.

As part of the development process, Murray has been testing a system using equipment from [Merit-Trax Technologies](#). The Montreal-based company has been involved with information technology in the food industry for the last 25 years, but has specialized in traceability solutions since 2000.

“We take the approach – especially for producers – that the solutions we build have to be designed to help them make more money,” says Merit-Trax president Michael Miskin. “It’s not just collecting information for the sake of collecting, but what we allow them to do with it so it helps them make more money and save time.”

In this case, Murray has been tracking cattle that were bought from the pre-conditioned calf sales at Keady Livestock. Using the RFID tags, the cattle were scanned with a Merit-Trax hand-held computer/scanner unit at a feedlot.

“We wanted to make sure the cattle we expected to be there, were actually there,” explains Murray. “And now those cattle are starting to go through the plants and we can get information back on an individual carcass basis.”

In essence, Murray says the tag can be tied to carcass data, which could then be relayed back to the cow-calf producer.

“And that has always been a concern; guys never get information back on their cattle. We’re trying to make traceability more of a possibility for learning as well as for food safety related issues.”

Murray says an immediate benefit relates to age verification. Provided the cow-calf producer age-verified the calves, a feedlot producer could scan the tag and quickly know the age of the animal.

“Animals over 30 months old are worth much less than those under 21 months. We want to know how old it is when we get it to the farm so we know what to do with it,” says Murray, referring to potential marketing scenarios.

Another short-term benefit of the system is to improve the record-keeping aspect of the Ontario Corn Fed Beef program. Murray says the system allows producers to record production information such as treatment and feed data.

“We can do a lot of the records required for our program audits with this system. That’s why we’re customizing it so that we can get the records we need from this very easily.”

Murray adds that the goal is to develop a system for producers that will work comfortably with the Ontario Corn Fed Beef program, with the hope that farmers can benefit from the ever-increasing investment by government in food traceability systems.

(The above article is from the latest edition of the [The News Feed](#), the newsletter of the Ontario Cattle Feeders’ Association)