

Animal Identification and Record Keeping

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RFID Shearwell Data Set Tag, photo courtesy of: Anita O’Brien

Animal Identification and Record Keeping

National Identification System

The Canadian Sheep Identification Program (CSIP) is a mandatory national identification system, which is administered by the Canadian Sheep Federation (CSF). The program was designed to address producer concerns about sheep health and meet consumer expectations for quality assurance and food safety. In addition, the program was designed to be affordable, simple, practical and reliable. Many livestock commodity groups are implementing similar tracking systems to improve food safety and to help contain disease outbreaks if they occur. The identification system for the sheep industry involves tagging all animals with approved, individually numbered tags before they leave their farm of origin. Producers are required to buy tags from a recognized agent. The series of numbers purchased by each producer is recorded. If a problem is detected with a carcass at slaughter, the tag will help to track the animal's origin and determine other animals it may have been in contact with. Tags are only read if a problem is detected with the carcass. As mentioned above, tagging for the national ID system is only necessary for the sale or purchase of animals. The tags are also mandatory for animals leaving the premises temporarily (e.g. exhibitions, veterinarian clinics, community pastures). If an animal is born and remains on your farm, tagging for the national system is not required.

The CSF is committed to ensuring that the CSIP evolves with the changing needs of producers and the industry. One aspect of animal management is the development of genetic resource database and record keeping in the sheep industry to allow producers to improve the genetics of their flock through selective breeding. Carcass grading reports are also a valuable tool that should be developed and this trial will be able to connect these details to the producer.

The federal government has committed to having a national traceability program in place by 2015 to allow for the tracing and tracking of products and food animals from the point of origin (the farm) to the consumer.

The CSF has investigated a number of tracking options that would best suit the unique size and structure of our industry, with Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) systems and electronic RFID ear tags emerging as the best option currently available. The RFID system helps sheep producers meet traceability requirements. The RFID system is also a powerful tool to collect, manage and analyze information for the purpose of increasing production efficiency and productivity. Contact the Canadian Sheep Federation for more information about the National Identification system (888-684-7739) or go to <http://www.cansheep.ca/cms/en/Programs/CSIPProgram/Tags/Tags.aspx>

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:

Canadian Sheep Identification Approved (CSIP) Approved Tags

The yellow Allflex button sheep tag and the yellow Shearwell data tag are the only Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags currently approved for use in the Canadian Sheep Identification Program (CSIP).

As of October 2011, producers may no longer purchase pink Ketchum Kurl-Lock #3 and Allflex dangle tags as official CSIP tags however, sheep producers may use up their existing stocks of pink Ketchum Kurl-Lock tags until a future date is established when the tags will be revoked from the official CSIP list. Producers are encouraged to use up existing Kurl-lock tags as soon as possible before they are revoked, and to apply RFID tags to lambs born from 2012 onwards.

Canadian Sheep Identification Program (CSIP) Requirements

Under the current CSIP, producer and stakeholder responsibilities include:

- All sheep and lambs must bear an approved CSIP ear tag before they leave their farm of origin. This includes animals leaving the premises temporarily (e.g. exhibitions, veterinarian clinics, community pastures). It is illegal to transport animals not bearing an approved tag.
- CSIP tags must be purchased from an approved distributor
- Sheep producers and feedlot operators are required to keep a record of:
 - All sheep or lambs entering your flock for breeding purposes
 - All sheep 18 months or older leaving your farm, other than those sold directly to a federally or provincially inspected abattoir
- Imported sheep must have an approved CSIP tag applied either before importation or within 7 days of the sheep reaching its initial destination.
- All sheep purchased must bear an approved CSIP ear tag. If a tag is subsequently lost, you must immediately apply a new CSIP ear tag; report the new identification number and, if known, the former identification number; and record information about the origin of the sheep as is known.
- Approved CSIP ear tags must not be removed from any live sheep or tampered with for any reason and must not be re-used. If a sheep dies on your property, the tag may be removed. The identification numbers of the approved tags borne by the sheep carcasses disposed of by the operator must be reported within 30 days after disposing of the carcass. There are no record-keeping or reporting requirements for the on-farm disposal of carcasses not bearing an approved tag.
- Auction marts, livestock dealers and packing plants are required to accept only sheep and lambs bearing an approved CSIP ear tag.

Position the tag properly

Place the tag 1/3 of the way along the ear away from the head, between the two main veins, with the male end of the tag in back and the female in front. It is recommended to tag the RIGHT ear.

In Ontario, tags may only be purchased through the Canadian Cooperative Wool Growers Limited 1-800-567-3693.

Management Tags and Identification Options

Producers may choose to use non-CSIP approved tags or identification methods for on-farm management practices only, provided they meet CSIP requirements for animal identification when animals leave their farm of origin.

Management ear tags can be purchased in a variety of shapes and sizes. Small, aluminium ‘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 aluminium 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. Aluminium 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 aluminium 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. When replacing tags, if possible, use the same hole that was made by the original tag.

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. 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.

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

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 scrubbable paint for this purpose. The paint brand can last up to 12 months under ideal circumstances. Scrubbable 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 scrubbable (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.

Sample Records:

The next few pages show examples of the type of records that you may wish to keep for your flock. Adapt to own farm. Lambing diaries are available from OSMA or OMAF. The SFIP program provides a means of tracking lamb growth and genetic progress of the flock. As noted above, for people who prefer to keep electronic records, there is a computer management program designed for use on sheep farms.

