

THE
MILLION-DOLLAR
QUESTION:

TATTOO
TAG?



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The ADCA requires permanent identification when registering your Dexter cattle. A permanent ID is much like a social security number for cattle. It should follow the animal for its lifetime. It is how we differentiate between animals even after the animal is sold. Prioritizing the use of permanent IDs in your herd management may prove helpful in the scenario of theft or a lost animal. It is how you prove that the animal is your property. Acceptable permanent ID comes in the form of either a Tattoo or USDA 840 tag in the ear. Both methods are applied differently and require separate preparation.

In history and still current today, ranchers may brand their cattle as their form of permanent ID. Instead, many people use tattooing or official government issued tags as permanent ID for their farm livestock. Most livestock registration associations have rules for what is accepted. Not following those association rules may delay the registration of animals. So when it is time for you to start applying permanent ID to your Dexters which method will you choose? Below I will explain the technique and purpose of each method, so you can make an informed decision when the time is right.

Tattooing can be as simple or as difficult as you want to make it. Each breeder has their own opinion on when this task should take place, regarding the age of the calf. Some do it at birth, while others wait until the calf is a bit older. We wait until the calf is closer to 5 months of age, so their ears are larger, giving us a bigger canvas to use.



You will need to purchase a tattoo kit from either your local farm store or an online vendor. There are many different brands, but most are a manual clamping tool. Ensure your kit comes with ample letters and numbers. You will need to purchase either black or green roll-on ink. You will need to form your own opinion on the longevity of the color. For me personally, I believe the green ink may last longer. Of course, the longevity of a tattoo may also reflect operator experience. Next, we will get into the How-To's on applying a tattoo.

Preparing your Dexter for tattooing is not that difficult. Most importantly, you must know "what tattoo" you are going to put on your calf. The ADCA has a guideline for acceptable tattoo formats. The first part must be the first letter of your farm (I.e. if your farm is Cherrydale Farm, the letter to use is C." The second part is a number indicating the order the calf was born that year (was it the second

calf born that year? Then use the #2.) The last part is a letter for the assigned breeder year (the ADCA website lists the letter year codes, but as an example, 2020 calves are to use the letter H and 2021 calves will use the letter I.) In the example above the tattoo would read C2H.

Always get your tattoo clamp set up beforehand with the correct letter and number format. Practice making impressions on a piece of paper to ensure the letters are all going the correct direction and order. If the calf is older you will likely need a proper restraint location, like a squeeze chute. As you can imagine it is not pain free to get a tattoo. Once you have your calf firmly restrained, wipe away any dirt or ear wax that is on the inside flap of the LEFT ear. The left ear is typically chosen because the right ear must be left available for the Brucellosis vaccination and corresponding tattoo on heifers. Now that the ear is clean, you will see the rises and valleys of the ear or better known as the “ribs of cartilage.” You will want to tattoo in between the ribs of the ear, on the flat smooth parts. The location of a tattoo is often placed in the upper 1/3 of the ear. Most tags are placed in the middle third.

After the ear is clean, generously roll on the ink. Next, line up the tattoo press on the ear. Firmly and quickly squeeze the handle and DO NOT let go for at least a few seconds. The bovine will throw its head around, so hold on. Release the tattoo clamp and roll more ink into the remaining holes. Take a toothbrush and scrub the ink down into the holes with more ink. Do not wipe off the excess ink.



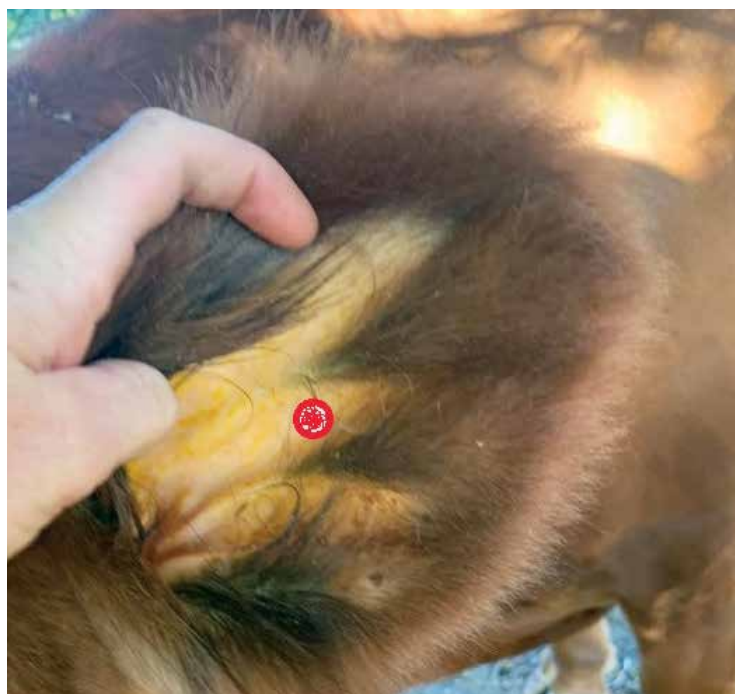
Ear Tattoo location: upper left ear, between cartilage ribs

The alternative to tattooing is using the government's USDA 840 tags. In 2011, the USDA proposed a rule for animal traceability to include such items as a uniform tagging system, tamper proof tags, and premise ID location database. The purpose was for the USDA to be able to trace and follow any livestock animals and their movement across the country. While Dexters are typically raised for more of a farm-to-table operation, we can still utilize the simplicity of the tagging system. The 840 tags are also becoming more widely required when doing state-to-state interstate travel.

The USDA tags display a 15-digit number, the US shield emblem, and an unlawful to remove stamp. The tags come in a variety of styles, including hanging, button, color, and shape variations. Manufacturers have designed the tags for one-time use, meaning their retention rates are much higher than your standard hanging number tag. The “Unlawful to remove” clause makes it a serious crime if someone removes the tag, with the purpose of concealing theft or for other deceptive intentions.

Each tag number starts with 840, which is the code for the USA and then followed by a unique number. For the USDA to issue tags to you, your name must first be in their premise database. This would involve you registering your farm location with the USDA. If you purchased a farm that was previously owned, often there is already a premise ID associated with the location, but will need to be updated with your farm information. To secure a Premise ID number, you will need to call your State Animal Health Commission. In Texas, this step only took a few minutes on the phone. Once you receive your premise ID, you can then order USDA tags from online vendors.

Preparing to apply a USDA tag can also be done at varying ages of a calf. We choose to wait until we are giving first vaccinations at around 4-5 months of age. Write down the tag number before applying the tag to the calf. If you have multiple calves to get tagged you may want to document the name of the calf, tag number, dam/sire info on a piece of paper. This will make your life easier when it is time to do the registration. Next, properly restrain the calf. Clean out the LEFT ear of any debris or dirt. Follow the instructions on the package since some manufacturers have different application tools. You will want to apply the tag in the middle 1/3 of the LEFT ear, and slightly further inward than a standard hanging tag. Depress the tool firmly and ensure the tag has been correctly placed and locked before letting the calf go.



Ear Tag location: middle left ear, between cartilage ribs

It should be noted that some breeders do both, to increase their security on their cattle, in the same way that branding was used. Some may just tattoo their own initials in the ear as another means of identifying the cattle when using the 840 tags.

When you are ready to complete new registration paperwork you will enter either the Tattoo you made in the ear or the LAST 6 digits on the USDA 840 tag (Not the entire 15 digit code.)

So now you should have a good idea of what will be the process, when you need to apply permanent ID, to any new cattle. If you have any further questions reach out to your Regional Director for ID requirements.