ADVICE ON EAR TAG APPLICATION IN CATTLE

Ear tags are designed and tested with the intention of staying in the ear of the animal for life. Although tags do break or can be lost through ripping out of ears or may occasionally pull through an enlarged hole, for example, following infection, a high proportion of ear tag loss can be attributed to poor application and/or ‘snags and traps’ on farms.

Ear tag loss is inconvenient and can incur significant expense (improperly identified animals may be returned from market or rejected at the abattoir and where a number issues are found at official farm inspections, movement restrictions and significant cross compliance penalties may be imposed). You may also be rendered liable to prosecution in cases of mis-identification.

Follow these simple steps to keep ear tag loss to a minimum.

1. Ensure the correct applicator is used. Some applicators can be used on a range of different manufacturers’ tags, but many are manufacturer specific. An incorrect tag applicator may appear to work but the length and type of pin are critical for effective closure. With plastic ear tags, if the male part of the tag is not effectively seated in the female, the tag will not withstand the rigours of an animal’s daily life and may be lost after short periods of wear.

2. Do not use applicators with worn or damaged pins. New pins are available for most applicators – check with your merchant/supplier.

3. Ensure the applicator is clean and serviceable. Rusted mechanisms or build up of dirt around the jaws can have a very significant effect on closure and proper engagement of the tag. Applicators have a hard life. Clean them after use and store dry. Manufacturers recommend replacing them after a few years service.

4. Avoid infection after tagging. Use clean tags and applicator and make sure the ear is clean. Wipe wet or dirty ears before application. Infection will cause irritation and the insertion hole to enlarge leading to risk of the tag pulling out through the hole. Tags may also have to be cut out to allow an infected ear to heal. Speak to your vet if you are having a regular problem for advice on treatment and prevention.
5. Apply two part plastic tags the correct way round. Plastic tags should always be applied with the ‘flat’ male leaf on the outside of the ear and the ‘raised head’ female part on the inside. The female part which is more at risk of becoming trapped in gates/feeder etc. is far better protected on the inside of the ear. Marking the top jaw of the applicator (the one with the pin attached for holding the male part) with a light coloured paint or ink will help in difficult situations or poor light. Some taggers have coloured caps on the pin jaw to enable the user to identify that the applicator is being used the correct way round.

6. Position the tag correctly in the ear. The recommended position in the ear to apply a plastic tag is approximately half way between the top and bottom edge (between the two thickened lines of cartilage) and a third to half way along the ear out from the head. If the tag is applied too close to the edge or towards the tip of the ear, it is at a weaker point and more vulnerable to damage. Metal tags should always be applied along the top edge and when tagging calves, allow a 5mm free space under the fold to allow for growth.

7. ‘Snags and traps’. Metal tags if used as secondary tags generally have a high retention rate but losses of plastic ‘flag’ type tags can vary widely between different farms. If the tags are correctly applied, the losses are generally due to tags becoming ensnared in objects around the farm. Junctions between metal bars or gates and feeders can trap tags but more often the risks are the easily avoidable ones – general debris such as string, netting, bits of wire or loose metal etc. Information from tag suppliers who follow up farm complaints of high ear tag loss suggests that the retention rates are much poorer on farms which have general debris left around animal feeding and loafing areas. Keep the animal environment tidy to avoid losses.

If properly applied, ear tag loss should not exceed 5%. If in doubt about ear tag application, consult your supplier or the tag manufacturer. They will want to keep your business and high ear tag loss rates do not help their reputation.

This is not an authoritative document on the law, and is only intended for guidance. In the interests of brevity, some details have been omitted. Always refer to the Legislation for the exact requirements.