

**POLICY BRIEF: Exploring farmers views on the uptake of cattle traceability technology**

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**1. KEY MESSAGE**

Reinforced communications about strategic benefits combined with promotion of the utility of Electronic Identification (EID) at the farm level could encourage greater farmer support for Cattle EID. Livestock farmers primarily view the proposed implementation of Cattle EID as connected to governance and traceability; future up-take would thus largely be driven by regulatory compliance. Potential benefits to farmers (improving disease control outcomes, as well as the efficiency of production and management systems) are often unrecognised. Furthermore, a number of perceived logistical barriers, including uncertainty about technical details, contribute to low enthusiasm for change amongst some farmers. Greater clarity surrounding some technicalities of a future roll-out can address specific concerns (for example, surrounding re-tagging).

**2. MAJOR FINDINGS**

**Understanding of strategic benefits:**

Most respondents understood that EID was for traceability. Some connected it with the food chain;

*“well I suppose it’s to keep everything correct so that nothing iffy goes into the food chain, isn’t it?”*

while others saw the requirement to electronically tag livestock as a matter of compliance with regulations;

*“just complying, it wasn’t up nor down to me.”*

Few immediately associated it with disease control without prompting.

**Understanding of on-farm/direct benefits:**

At an abstract level some respondents could see farm-level benefits in terms of improved record keeping for breeding and production purposes. However, in practice few were using EID in conjunction with their current management systems. Some cited technological barriers including the fear of adopting a technology that they believed would become obsolete, or may be the ‘wrong’ one;

*“well... thought about doing it, but it’s...you know, you don’t wanna go ahead and pick a system or a thing to use before the...before the government decide what they want to use!”*

or they had no clear idea about how an integrated system would be of benefit to them. Others were enthusiastic about “the dream” of a fully integrated system but said the investment costs were prohibitive.

*“I think the outlay you’ve got to invest in getting the equipment to do it to start with, is a big...thought to justify it isn’t it? It mounts up. The thousands are mounting up, you’re into...you’re into eh... by the time you take your weighing and that into account you’re probably at four thousand [pounds].”*

**Logistics:**

Enthusiasm for adopting new practices whether for ‘strategic’ or ‘on-farm’ benefits is intrinsically linked with the perceived ease or difficulty of the change-over process. Logistical concerns cover a variety of issues.

Respondents were interested in discussing the practicalities of the transition, primarily whether the roll-out will be ‘**phased**’ (similar to sheep EID) or ‘**big bang**’ (a complete changeover on a set date). The merits of the two approaches were closely tied to the issue of **re-tagging**. Cutting out and replacing existing tags was for

some farmers an unwelcome prospect. Re-tagging was represented variously as an animal welfare issue, a health and safety issue for farm workers and as an economic cost.

*“I think to go re-tagging older animals would be... a nuisance! And it would also be...you know, everybody’s shouting about health and safety, you know, if you’re having to go put in new tags into older cattle, I mean there’s an element of danger there to get injured...”*

The degree of opposition appeared related to the number of cattle involved, with suckler herds conceivably requiring wholesale re-tagging. Beef finishers, in comparison might be less inconvenienced by re-tagging, potentially buying in pre-tagged cattle. Against a phased approach, farmers were aware of the issues regarding the longevity of cattle (as opposed to sheep) which might mean a phased roll out continuing for a protracted length of time, beginning with tagging calves and stock as they left the holding;

*“I personally think that something that’s bred on the farm doesn’t need to be ID’d till time of movement.”*

This in turn might necessitate **running parallel systems** with the current paper passport and EID systems running side by side. **Big bang**, in comparison offered obvious advantages;

*“you get the whole benefit right away; you don’t have these two systems working.”*

Several respondents saw the logistical benefit in replacing the current Cattle Tracing System (CTS) and its associated paper passport.

*“If EID was used correctly, used to the full advantage, you don’t need a passport.”*

Others saw CTS as fit for purpose and were not convinced about any benefits of cattle EID:

*“To me the passport is a fantastic system... It’s fine. If EID does away with the passports, ...what have we got, an E-passport somewhere?”*

### 3. OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to contribute to a better understanding of farmers’ and crofters’ views regarding barriers to the future implementation of cattle EID.

### 4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our evidence suggests that the link between Cattle EID and strategic benefits for the national herd could be better communicated. Multiple knowledge transfer initiatives including information and guidance could reinforce the underlying objective of EID as enhancing traceability to develop effective disease control and eradication strategies and might further be used to raise awareness of on-farm benefits. Clear policies about practical aspects of implementation (for example roll-out) and operation of cattle EID could allay some fears and remove uncertainties.

### 5. IMPORTANT ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This qualitative study took the form of 24 semi-structured, face to face interviews with crofters on Skye (7) and farmers on Orkney (8) and in Aberdeenshire (9). Participants predominantly had mixed cattle/sheep holdings. Some respondents were already using EID for management purposes. It is importantly to highlight that this qualitative study is not presented as a representative sample.

### 6. LINKS TO EXISTING PUBLICATIONS OR REPORTS

Barriers to farmer adoption of Cattle EID. Dominic Duckett. SRUC Policy Briefing January 2014 (RPC RB 2014/03)