

NEW YORK STATE 4-H MEAT GOAT PROJECT FACT SHEET #7

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GOAT IDENTIFICATION

It is important to be able to identify each of your goats easily and accurately in order to keep accurate records of how they are growing, who has had what vaccines, who was born when, and who their parents were. In a small herd you often know each goat by name and matching description. However, your veterinarian and any friends who feed for you when you are on vacation need a simple way to reliably identify your goats. One easy way is by having each goat wear a collar or leg band with their own individual number on it. However, collars and bands can fall off. Most goat associations require your goat to have a permanent form of identification called a tattoo before they will allow you to register the goat and allow it to be recorded in the pedigree files for that association. Veterinarians will also need to be able to identify your animal by a permanent identification when they fill out the rabies slip or health certificates verifying what vaccines and tests your goat has had. Other forms of permanent or semipermanent identification that are easy to read include eartags and freeze brands. However, few people have the equipment for freeze branding and depending on the size of the freeze brand your goat may look like a walking billboard. Eartags can have other problems that will be discussed later.

Tattooing - This is the preferred method of permanent identification (until computer chips get cheap!). Holes are punctured under the skin, ink is worked into them and then the skin is allowed to grow over the ink, leaving a number the color of the ink embedded in the animal's skin. In the old days you would have made the holes with a big needle, nowadays we use tattoo pliers available through most livestock supply catalogs and stores. The small sized tattoo plier (also used for tattooing rabbits) works best on goats, especially goat kids. The numbers will grow bigger along with the kid's ear as it grows. You must also purchase a series of metal digits or blocks that can be loaded into the pliers. Each block has a bunch of tiny metal spikes or pins sticking out from one side of it that form the shape of a number or letter. The pliers can be clamped onto the tail web or ear of a goat and these spikes will press into the skin and leave a pattern of holes in the shape of the numbers and letters. There are two reasons that you might put the tattoo in the animal's tail web, 1) La Mancha goats don't have big enough ear flaps to tattoo, and 2) some dairies that milk from the rear find tail tattoos more convenient to read than ear tattoos when identifying goats in the milk parlor. Here are some simple steps to tattooing -

- 1) Figure out the proper tattoo number for that goat. Be sure to follow the rules for his or her breed association. For example, as you stand behind your goat, the American Dairy Goat Association requires a herd code (usually made up of 3 letters sometimes followed by a number if more than one herd has the same 3 initials for its herd code) in her right ear, and her animal code in her left ear. The ADGA animal code starts with a specific letter that represents the year of her birth (L= 1998, M=1999, N=2000, P=2001, etc.; the letters G, I, O, Q and U are not used). This letter is followed by a number to distinguish her from other herdmates born the same year. The number used is often her place in the order of kids you had born or registered that year. The two Boer goat associations have similar rules but assign a different order of letters for each designated year. If your market wether is not registered with any organization, you can put your initials in one ear followed by a number that indicates if he is the first wether you've owned or what, i.e., JES2 might be the second wether owned by John Everett Smith. Load the proper tattoo series for one ear into the pliers. It is a good idea to check the number by clamping it onto a piece of paper because it is easy to put in the wrong numbers (for example 2 instead of 5) or to put them in backwards.
- 3) Restrain the goat. Kids can be held in a disbudding crate or towel. Older goats can be straddled and their head held against the attendant's thighs.

- 4) Locate the area that you want to tattoo. Plan on going between the large veins that run lengthwise along the goat's ear. If you hit these, they may bleed and you will not get as good a tattoo.
- 5) Disinfect the area with rubbing alcohol and then rub ink on it with a toothbrush (green ink in paste form works best even on dark skinned goats).
- 6) Stand at front of goat and lift the bottom edge (farthest from the top of its head) of the goat's ear towards you and clamp the tattoo pliers on it tightly to puncture the ear. Then unclamp and remove the pliers.
- 7) Check the puncture marks and use your toothbrush to push more ink into the holes.
- 8) Apologize to your goat, but tell him it was necessary.

Eartagging - Large herds need an easy way to identify their goats without having to catch them to look at a tattoo. Neck collars can be dangerous for goats that go out to pasture if they will not break or slip off easily if the goat catches them on something and starts to strangle. Eartags may be much better in such situations. The pliers used to attach eartags are similar to tattoo pliers and easy to use. Try to avoid using metal tags as they infect easily. Try to avoid using tags that must be applied along the edge of the ears as goats like to bite each other's ears and in grabbing these tags may rip the unlucky goat's ear. Instead, it is best to use small plastic tattoos that are applied to the ear in between the big veins just like a tattoo. Of course, they have the advantage of being able to be read from the outside of the ear unlike a tattoo. Be careful not to tag over your goat's tattoo.

Suggested Activities

- 1) Identify the types of equipment used for identification. Have them available to be handled and discussed.
- 2) Quiz each other using the American Dairy Goat tattooing code to guess what age, order of birth in a specific herd and the imaginary herd name of a specific tattoo series. For example, right ear JKA, left ear M13 might mean the 13th kid born in 1999 at the Just Kidding Around Herd.
- 3) Practice tattooing on a piece of paper.
- 4) Use a flashlight to read tattoos on real goats.
- 5) Get together with your 4-H group and learn how to tattoo and/or eartag. Do your wether if he still needs to be done. Depending on your age and inclination, you can try doing the actual tagging, help load the proper eartag or tattoo number on the applicator, help apply ink or disinfect the ear, or help restrain the goat.