NEW YORK STATE 4-H
WORKING GOAT PROJECT
FACT SHEET #6

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HOW TO TATTOO AND EARTAG

Tattooing is currently the preferred method of permanent identification for most goat breed associations. A pattern of holes in the shape of a number or letter is punctured into the skin. Colored ink is worked into the holes and then the skin is allowed to grow over the ink, leaving a number or letter the color of the ink embedded in the animal’s skin. Livestock tattoo pliers are available through most livestock supply catalogs and stores. 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 are clamped onto the hairless inside part of the goat’s ear causing the tiny spikes to press into the skin and leave a pattern of holes in the shape of the numbers and letters. Either the small sized tattoo plier (also used for tattooing rabbits) or can be used on goats. The small sized tattooer is easier to fit in a goat kid’s ear. However the tattoo will grow as the animal’s ear grows bigger and some goat raisers feel the smaller tattoo “stretches” and becomes harder to read.

Tattoos are placed in the ears of most goat breeds. However, La Mancha goats don’t have large enough ear flaps to tattoo. Therefore LaManchas are tattooed in the tail web. The tattoo pliers are clamped down onto the ears or tail web.

Here are some simple steps to tattooing:-

1) Figure out the proper tattoo for that goat. Be sure to follow the rules for their 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 your goat’s right ear, and your goat’s individual code in the left ear. The ADGA individual code starts with a specific letter that represents the year of your goat’s birth (K= 2018, L=2019, M=2020, N=2021, etc.; the letters G, I, O, Q and U are not used). This letter is followed by a number to distinguish your goat from other goats born in the herd in the same year. The number used is often her place in the order of kids you had born that year. The American Boer Goat Association also requires your herd code in the right ear but uses different letters for each year in the left ear.

2) 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 the wrong order.

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**

The pliers used to attach eartags are very similar to tattoo pliers and easy to use. The procedure used for putting in eartags is also very similar to the method we use to tattoo a goat’s ear. Try to avoid using metal eartags as they infect easily. Also avoid using eartags that must be applied along the edge of the ears. This is because goats sometimes like to bite each other’s ears when they are angry. They will sometimes grab onto these eartags with their teeth and rip them out causing a big tear in the unlucky goat’s ear.

Instead, it is best to use small, plastic eartags that are applied to the ear in between the big veins just like a tattoo. Most official scrapie ID eartags are designed to be applied between the veins. This makes it must less likely that another goat will rip out the tag and tear the ear. Unlike a tattoo, eartags have the advantage of being able to be read from the outside of the ear as well as from the inside. However, they do tend to get broken or tear out of the ear over the years. Therefore they are considered semi-permanent forms of identification rather than permanent.

**Suggested Activities**

1) Practice tattooing on a piece of paper.

2) Use a flashlight to read tattoos on real goats.

3) 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. You can help load the proper eartag or tattoo number on the applicator, help apply ink or disinfect the ear, or help restrain the goat. By the end of this practice you may be able to do the actual eartagging, or even tattooing, yourself!