



AgForce Queensland Farmers Limited

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Department of Agriculture & Fisheries
Biosecurity Queensland
41 George Street
BRISBANE

By Email: malcolm.letts@daf.qld.gov.au, marguerite.clarke@daf.qld.gov.au

Dear Malcolm and Marguerite

Re: AgForce Queensland Farmers Limited Submission into DAF Consultation concerning the future of Livestock Brands and Earmarks

As you know, AgForce is a peak organisation representing Queensland's cane, cattle, grain and sheep, wool & goat producers. These industries in Queensland generated around \$8.4 billion in on-farm value of production in 2020-2021. AgForce's purpose is to advance sustainable agribusiness and strives to ensure the long-term growth, viability, competitiveness and profitability of these industries. Over 6,400 farmers, individuals and businesses provide support to AgForce through membership. Queensland producers provide high-quality food and fibre to Australian and overseas consumers and contribute significantly to the social fabric of regional, rural and remote communities.

AgForce thanks the Department of Agriculture & Fisheries for the opportunity to provide feedback into the Consultation on how livestock brands and earmarks will be managed in the future.

AgForce believes none of the identified options in the consultation fully address what industry needs; a fit for purpose, affordable, streamlined system for livestock brands and earmarks in Queensland. Brands are the only proof of ownership of cattle and are used by almost all producers for achieving best on-farm management practices and to safeguard against offences like theft.

AgForce strongly requests the Department provide further consultation, including detailed investigations and assessments of potential approaches to the delivery of a fit for purpose, affordable, streamlined system before conclusions are drawn. Critically, this additional work must be done by and with Industry.

Please see attached the full AgForce submission. We appreciate the ongoing dialogue with the Department when this important topic is further considered.

Again, thank you for giving us and our members the opportunity to provide this submission. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact Ivar Bisseling, Livestock Policy Director, on 0429 649 881 or by email: bisselingi@agforceqld.org.au.

Yours sincerely

Peter Hall
AgForce Cattle Board President

Stephen Tully
AgForce Sheep, Wool and Goat Board President

Enc: AgForce Submission

AGFORCE POSITION CONCERNING THE DAF CONSULTATION ON LIVESTOCK BRANDS AND EARMARKS IN QUEENSLAND

With this submission, AgForce has chosen not to answer all 22 questions from the DAF survey, but to focus on questions 7 – 9 and 16, concerning the options for the future administrative system for livestock brands and earmarks.

DAF Survey Questions 7 and 16: What is your preferred branding and earmarking option?

AgForce believes none of the identified options fully address what industry needs; a fit for purpose, affordable, streamlined system for livestock brands and earmarks in Queensland. Brands are the only proof of ownership of cattle and are used by almost all producers for achieving best on-farm management practices and to safeguard against offences like theft.

There are a lot of unknowns concerning the provided options. For instance, the impact of certain practical and financial changes for producers and rural communities, like giving producers the option to not brand if they wish and there are opportunities worth investigating further to estimate their potential benefits, including getting rid of the enormous administrative burden for producers (and the Department) to get a new brand, earmark or transfer approved.

AgForce strongly requests the Department provide further consultation, including detailed investigations and assessments of potential approaches to the delivery of a fit for purpose, affordable, streamlined system before conclusions are drawn. Critically, this additional work must be done by and with Industry.

DAF Survey Questions 8 and 9: Tell us the main reasons why this is your preferred option and are there any other/alternative options that should be explored?

This topic sits close to producers' hearts because we use livestock identification every day to manage our businesses. The consultation period was short; two months with the public holidays included. AgForce has engaged its membership and elected representatives, for example through weekly meetings, newsletters, social media and with 236 people attending two webinars held on 9 and 12 January 2023. The high number of webinar attendees and highly emotive responses received to the concerns of banning branding altogether, underlines the importance of this issue and gives weight to our submission to extend the process. It also means we cannot rush decisions and changes; we must get it right, which needs further consultation, investigation and assessment before conclusions can be drawn.

If anything, the last few months have taught us that the system currently in place has major flaws and that the future options proposed raise many additional questions as well. The feedback AgForce received from its members was not clear cut. Although the majority of members we engaged with recognise the current system needs an upgrade and producers seem to accept a reasonable fee to maintain a new IT system, more time is needed to work through and achieve consensus on what a fit for purpose, affordable, streamlined system for livestock brands and earmarks in Queensland looks like. Therefore, AgForce supports none of the branding and earmarking options currently proposed, it needs further consultation.

Change is needed:

The DAF Consultation enabled us to look closer at the current livestock brands and earmarks system and made us realise it is far from perfect and needs an overdue upgrade. Some of the flaws in the current system identified are:

- 6 – 9 months wait times for a new brand, earmark or transfer to be approved. 50% of new three-piece brand applications in Queensland and 70% of symbol brand applications are initially rejected and need to be reworked. New entrants to industry should not be discouraged by having to wait nor should they be tempted to operate illegally.
- No return has been submitted for at least three years for 39,739 three-piece horse and cattle brands (or 57% of the total brands and earmarks on issue), making it impossible to know whether they are still in use.
- There is no annual return for sheep and goat earmarks and therefore very few earmarks ever become deregistered and available for re-use.

- There is no formal compliance checking/enforcement on registered brands at the meatworks and saleyards (seen by many producers as second line of defence against theft and other offences).
- The administrative and financial burden on producers and Department staff is very high, considering:
 - Manual checks on uniqueness of new brands.
 - When a brand is cancelled it cannot be used for 5 years.
 - When registering a symbol brand, you firstly register a three-piece brand.
 - Same requirements for an earmark.
 - Separate registration of special, distinctive, and distinguishing brands.
- There is no register or record of producers in Queensland that make use of the ongoing COVID-19 related exemption of not having to brand, which is in place to avoid having staff working in close proximity to each other during the pandemic.

Too many unknowns that need further consultation, investigating and assessments:

AgForce requests more time for industry, the Department and other stakeholders to investigate and assess potential future impacts of certain practical and financial changes on producers, their families and their local communities. Brands are the only proof of ownership of cattle and are used by almost all producers for achieving best on-farm management practices and to safeguard against offences like theft. Some of the unknowns that need more data for further thought and consultation are:

- A thorough assessment of the likely future number of stock theft cases (cattle numbers) if the number of clean skin cattle increases because of producers not having to brand their cattle anymore if they choose not to do so.
- *Considering the above:*
 - An assessment of the negative impact of a potential increase in stock theft on livestock owners (and families) and local communities' mental health. According to DAF's RIS, stock theft can have devastating economic consequences, create significant community harm and damage confidence for individual livestock owners. An increase in clean skin cattle will most probably lead to more theft and local disputes, which would raise serious public concerns if not mitigated or handled effectively.
 - An estimation of associated costs to solve crimes, to deliver mental support to livestock owners and the local community and additional costs to prevent any offences associated with cattle from happening.
 - Insight in possible problems local governments envisage with more cleanskin cattle, considering their use of stock routes etc and plans how to mitigate related risks.
 - A debate if brands serve a public benefit for instance in reducing crime.
 - An explanation how to settle neighbours' disputes over mustered clean skin cattle, such as occurs regularly on Cape York
- Validation of the estimated costs to build and maintain a new IT system.
- *Considering the above:*
 - An assessment of the annual renewal costs over time, working through different scenarios, for instance a rise in costs per user associated with a potential decline in the overall pool of registered brands in use over time.
 - An assessment of the costs to regulate and enforce the appropriate use of brands and earmarks and retain offence provisions and penalties for various offences, such as tampering or defacing brands.
 - Clarity how the Department will distribute fees to cover costs related to the livestock brand and earmark system. Approximately 86,414 brands x \$65 makes \$5.6 million income annually, which exceeds the broadly estimated maintenance costs in the RIS of \$2.1 million per year once the IT system is built and operational.
 - Further consultation on the fee structure and payment options.
 - Clarity on industry's positioning/role to oversee recovery of actual/real, efficient costs.
- A more thorough investigation of ways to best register and prove an exemption to brand, easily visible and accessible for others.
- An assessment of the compliance costs for instance to verify if cattle producers who 'opt out' and so choose not to brand, do not use their brand equipment anymore.

- An assessment of the capacity of cattle producers to pay annual renewal fees and appropriate hardship provisions that might apply, such as in drought or other natural disaster.
- An investigation for any synergies with upcoming reviews of the NLIS and RBE systems.

Opportunities worthwhile investigating further:

This review of Queensland's *Brands Act 1915* and the accompanying new IT system creates opportunities for industry and government towards developing a fit for purpose, affordable streamlined system for livestock brands and earmarks in Queensland. The potential of some of these opportunities needs further investigation for industry to fully embrace them:

- The option for producers to not brand their cattle is only viable if associated costs are known and pathways to register and establish proof of exemption are worked through.
- What would a streamlined system look like, when incorporating the opportunities to:
 - Automated checks on uniqueness of new brands.
 - No 5-year waiting period (or a reduced waiting period) to use a retired brand again.
 - Symbol brand without registering a three-piece brand.
 - Same for earmark.
 - No special, distinctive and distinguishing brands needed anymore.
 - Introduce the option to be able to retire a brand with heritage value.
 - Much shorter application and transfer period (KPI).
- The introduction of an annual renewal fee also for producers who choose to exempt from branding their cattle. This would be an extra incentive for cattle owners to not use the brand equipment after an exemption is granted. In other words, it would prevent a large increase in offences where cattle are branded, but renewal fees are not paid. It also would avoid the offence of having possession, without lawful excuse, of a branding implement that they were not entitled to use.
- Investigate a simple and practical way for brand owners to administer annual (3-5 years) renewal fees, for instance in line with the RBE system.
- What would any system take-over by industry in future look like?
- How could a review of new legislation after 3-5 years, incorporate new lessons learnt?

Conclusion:

AgForce strongly requests the Department provide further consultation, including detailed investigations and assessments of potential approaches to the delivery of a fit for purpose, affordable, streamlined system before conclusions are drawn. Critically, this additional work must be done by and with Industry.