

# INFO SHEET

## Veterinary Services

United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Animal and  
Plant Health  
Inspection  
Service

May 1999

## Unique Identification Methods for U.S. Equids

Equine owners must be able to distinguish one animal on their premises from another to manage day-to-day and long-term care.

Most equine owners readily recognize their equids as individuals using color and markings, however as equid numbers on a premises grow or as movement of the population on and off a premises increases, a more reliable method of identifying equids may be required. When an equid is to be shipped, raced, or sold, the operator must employ a legally valid method for identifying the animal.

The USDA's National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) collected data on eight equine identification practices via personal interview from a representative sample of equine operations in 28 states.<sup>1</sup> These operations represented about three-fourths of the equine population and three-fourths of operations with equids in the U.S. For this study, equids were defined as horses, miniature horses, ponies, mules, donkeys, and burros. Resident equids were those animals for which the operation was a home base as opposed to visiting animals. Overall 2,904 operations with one or more equids participated in the Equine '98 Study's first interviews from March 16 through April 10, 1998. More detailed information on the study and the sampling methodology is available in NAHMS Equine '98 tabular summary reports.

Some methods of identification are used to identify groups of equids, while others identify equids as individuals. Operations may use more than one method of identification per equid.

According to the Equine '98 results, 57.1 percent of operations (57.6 percent of equids) in the U.S. used a unique identification for at least one equid. A larger percentage (76.2 percent) of operations in the Western

Figure 1  
Percent of Operations that Used a Unique Identification for Any Equids by Region, 1997

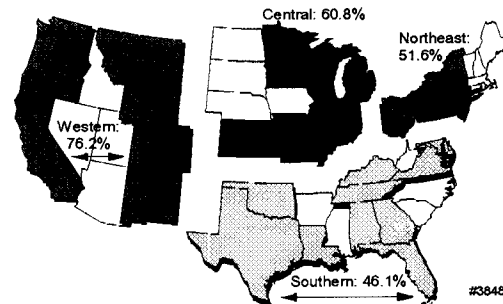
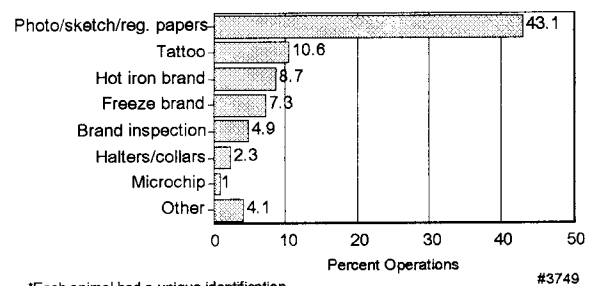


Figure 2  
Percent of Operations that Used the Following Identification Methods for Resident Equids\*, 1997



\*Each animal had a unique identification.

region than other regions used some identification method (Figure 1). Operations where the primary use of equids was racing, show/competition, or breeding were more likely to use unique identification than operations with other primary uses of equids.

In 1997, the largest percentage of equine operations used *photographs, sketches, or registration papers* to uniquely identify resident equids (43.1 percent, Figure 2). About the same percentage of resident equids were identified in this manner. Photographs and sketches are useful to identify individuals on premises, however they are not considered legal proof of an equid's identity. Breed registries issue registration papers for individual horses and generally include a sketch of the equid's markings and information about age, parentage, and ownership. Registration papers are legally transferred to the new owners when an animal is sold.

<sup>1</sup>Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

The next largest percentage of equine operations uniquely identified their resident equids with *tattoos* (10.6 percent), although tattoo as a unique identification was used for only 6.2 percent of all equids. Tattooing was most prevalent in the Northeast U.S. in 1997 and was more commonly utilized by operations that used equids primarily for racing than for other purposes (Figure 3).<sup>1</sup> This number, along with a letter denoting year of birth, is tattooed inside the equid's upper lip. These tattoos are useful not only for uniquely identifying an equid but for determining its exact age and whether or not it has ever raced in the U.S.

The *hot iron brand* is one of the oldest methods of permanent identification. This method is generally used to identify groups of equids belonging to a particular ranch or farm, rather than to identify individual animals on the same ranch. However, some equids have multiple brands, and the more brands an animal carries, the easier it is to identify the individual. An estimated 8.7 percent of equine operations used hot iron branding, according to the Equine '98. While only 5.1 percent of equids were identified in this manner across the U.S., 15.7 percent of equids in the Western region were identified using hot iron brands. Operations that primarily used equids for show/competition and farm/ranch were more likely to use hot iron brands than operations that used equids for other purposes.

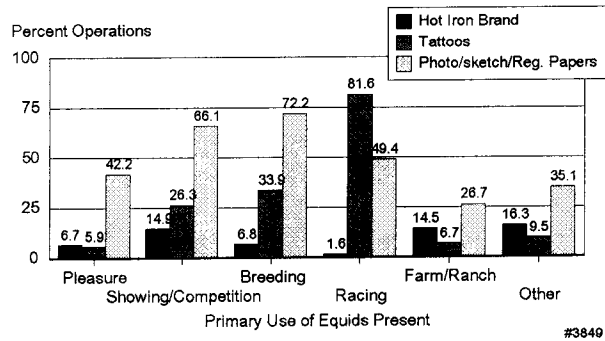
*Freeze branding* is similar to hot iron branding except that the branding iron is cooled in liquid nitrogen prior to applying it to the equid's skin. Some horses are freeze branded under the mane with letters and symbols specific to the individual. Otherwise, freeze branding is used to identify groups of animals belonging to a particular ranch, farm, or breed. Approximately 7.3 percent of equine operations used this method of identification, but only 2.9 percent of equids were identified using freeze brands as a unique identification. Freeze branding was most commonly used as a unique identification on breeding (15.6 percent) and show/competition (15.1 percent) operations, followed by farm/ranch operations (12.8 percent).

Named for the now outdated procedure of solely examining a horse's brand to determine rightful ownership, *brand inspection* currently consists of an examination by a State Brand Inspector to confirm ownership by various methods. Generally, registration papers, previous brand inspections, bills of sale, and any of the other identification methods discussed

<sup>1</sup> Horses that race under the American Quarter Horse Association, Jockey Club, or the United States Trotting Association rules are tattooed with a unique number.

Figure 3

Percent of Operations that Used the Following Animal Identification Methods\* by Primary Use of Equids, 1997



\*For resident equids (each animal had a unique identification).

earlier may be used. Some states require a brand inspection to be performed on every horse to be sold on horses traveling more than 75 miles and for travel out of state. After confirmation of ownership, an official brand inspection form is filled out and given to the owner. This form identifies the current owner and includes a detailed description of the individual equid. Brand inspections were used on 4.9 percent of equine operations and uniquely identified 5.0 percent of all equids. However, in the Western region, 19.6 percent of operations and 18.3 percent of equids were identified in this manner.

Like photographs and sketches, *halters* or *collars* are useful for identification. Because they are easily removed or lost, they are not considered legal proof of an equid's identity. About 2.3 percent of equine operations and 2.6 percent of equids were identified via these methods.

*Microchips* are tiny devices that may be inserted under an equid's skin, generally in the neck region. They are easy to insert and are invisible once in place. Coded information carried in the microchip may be read with a special electronic scanner to individually identify the animal. Some sale facilities have purchased scanners and routinely scan all equids entering sales in an attempt to prevent stolen animals from wrongfully changing hands. In 1997, microchip identification is infrequently used in the U.S. (1.0 percent of operations and 0.9 percent of equids overall).

Finally, 4.1 percent of operations (3.5 percent of equids) used *other methods*, such as blood or DNA typing, permanent scars, and injuries, to identify their equids.

Centers for Epidemiology and Animal Health  
 USDA:APHIS:VS, attn. NAHMS  
 2150 Centre Ave., Bldg. B, MS 2E7  
 Fort Collins, CO 80526-8117  
 (970) 494-7000  
 E-mail: [NAHMSweb@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:NAHMSweb@aphis.usda.gov)  
<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/ceah/cahm>

N295.599