

Opinion of beef cattle producers about hot iron branding and its animal welfare consequences

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Hot iron branding is a procedure commonly practiced in beef farms. The aim of this study was to identify the perception of beef cattle producers about hot iron branding and its animal welfare consequences. A questionnaire was developed to investigate producer opinion about animal welfare aspects of hot iron branding. In order to obtain contact details of beef cattle producers in the State of Paraná, nine institutions related to the beef cattle industry were contacted; only one of them agreed to participate in the project. The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. After contacting all 24 producers, 17 were willing to participate. Producers were unanimous (100%) (17/17) when declaring that the identification of animals in their farms is an important practice. When asked about the standard method of identification used by them, 70.6% (12/17) stated that hot iron branding is the method of choice, and the others (5/17) stated that they use ear tagging. Producers who declared the use of hot iron branding have been using this method at their farms for more than two decades, suggesting a possible tradition in relation to this procedure. The cost was the most common answer given by all producers in our study when asked about the reasons why they wouldn't consider other methods viable for application. When asked about how much pain they believe cattle feel when branded with a hot iron, the median pain score given was 4 (min 2, max 5), on a scale from 1 (no pain) to 5 (maximum pain). This result associated to the fact that most of the interviewed farmers still use hot iron branding suggest that although producers might recognize the pain associated to specific procedures, they do not always act to mitigate it. This situation is in conflict with the Brazilian law 9.605/1998, it is illegal to abuse, mistreat, injure or mutilate animals. So, the unanimity about the importance of identification showed by producers and considering the law, there is a demand for non-painful methods of identification. Farmer recognition of the pain involved in hot iron branding might be considered per se as an important first step towards the adoption of alternative methods; further research is needed to understand the challenges involved in the next step, which is transforming this recognition into actions to mitigate suffering. In terms of animal welfare, future efforts should focus on refining and developing new methods that are inexpensive and that respect the quality of life of animals.

Keywords: animal welfare, identification, farmers

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