

Hunterdon buffalo farm tests tagging technology for livestock

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Alexandra Pais/For The Star-Ledger
Eric Doyle tags a bison at the Readington River Buffalo Farm in Readington today.

READINGTON -- From a distance, Erick Doyle's animals resemble large, shaggy cows grazing in the pastures of a typical Hunterdon County farm.

Walk a little closer, and their horns and humped backs give them away: These are bison. A little closer yet, and the creatures grow skittish, nervously galloping back and forth in their enclosure.

And there's no mistaking a buffalo for a dairy cow once it's in the squeeze chute.

A squeeze chute is the narrow holding pen where buffalo prove they're wild — snorting and bucking against metal walls and rattling the gates. Here, handlers can temporarily hold cattle to inspect or tag them, which is what Doyle and his father, Jerry Doyle, were doing this afternoon.

Readington River Farm — the only buffalo farm in New Jersey — is the testing ground for a new high-tech tagging system that was recently developed by a Newark company.

These ear tags function like E-ZPass tags, except they don't need batteries. They can transmit information about the animal's age, weight, feeding status, genealogy, health and more from a distance.



Alexandra Pais for Star Ledger

Tagged bison head out of the chute and back into their enclosure at the Readington River Farm in Readington.

“It makes it easier for me to get a read on a cow in the field,” Doyle said.

According to inventor Bill Carr, the system will eventually enable cattle farmers like Doyle to identify an animal by simply pointing a signal receiver at it, instead of herding them, one by one, through the chute. Although Carr didn't have buffalo in mind when he developed this remote sensing system (he designed it for cows), this is a more strenuous test of the system, he said. His company, RFID Sensor Systems, chose Doyle's farm because of the size of his herd — Readington River Farm has over 200 buffalo.

Carr and his system engineer, Ankit Vashi, are testing their RFID (radio frequency identification) cattle tags in order to get them approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for sale.

Standard cattle ear tags on the market have a transmission distance of just five or six feet, said Carr, while his work 50 to 80 feet.

Aside from making life less stressful for cattle and their farmers, this technology might someday allow the USDA to trace an animal “from birth to the dinner plate,” marketing consultant Art Klein said, which can help contain diseases like mad cow. When farmers can't isolate a diseased animal, they're sometimes forced to kill the entire herd, he said, and this could prevent that.

“I really see a lot of promise in the system that's being tested right now,” Doyle said.