

**CODE OF PRACTICE
FOR THE
IDENTIFICATION
OF
SEMI-FERAL PONIES**

JANUARY 2014

EXMOOR PONY SOCIETY

DARTMOOR COMMONERS COUNCIL

NEW FOREST VERDERERS

IDENTIFICATION OF SEMI-FERAL PONIES

CODE OF PRACTICE FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF SEMI-FERAL PONIES

INTRODUCTION

Britain benefits from unique livestock breeds adapted over centuries to their home locations, including semi-feral native ponies. These semi-feral ponies can be classified into two groups:

- Registered, where foals are eligible for entry into their respective Stud Books, as found on Exmoor, Dartmoor and in the New Forest.
- Unregistered, foals on Dartmoor and in the New Forest that are not registered in an appropriate studbook.

Both these two groups of ponies are essential to the conservation grazing management of these areas; they balance vegetation across the moorland and forest areas and are essential for grazing alongside cattle and sheep. These ponies are kept in remote locations, range freely over large areas, and may only be collected up once or twice a year.

When out on the moor or in the forest animal identification is a necessity for the good management of ponies to ensure that welfare problems can be dealt with effectively. Owners of ponies need to be identified quickly to ensure that veterinary attention, if necessary, can be provided without delay. Stress is reduced if the owner is identified and just a small group is brought in rather than the whole herd. Visual identification is designed to allow identification of animals at a distance and also ensures that abandoned ponies, including entire males, when seen are quickly recognised and removed.

Robust visual methods of identification which allow identification of animals at a distance are considered to be essential by the pony keepers at this time. A microchip alone is not viable as, at present, no suitable implant and/or reader is available that is able to read microchips at a distance of more than 10 to 20 cm. There are currently no central or local databases of microchip information, and more importantly, no reliable 24 hour remote access for microchip identification particularly in isolated moorland and forest locations. Although freeze brands allow identification of animals at a distance, they are also unsuitable as they are not recommended for foals and require much longer restraint. Pony keepers consider there are few, if any, welfare advantages over hot branding. Collars have been tried but found to be of poor utility for identification as they are not suitable for foals and 66% of those fitted annually in the New Forest are lost.

At the present time a hot brand is the chosen way to identify semi-feral ponies as it fulfils the moorland societies' identification needs. It also requires a shorter restraint of ponies as the time of application is shorter than that of freeze branding and there is little, if any, swelling. For this purpose, the Mutilation (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007 (the "Mutilation Regulations") grant a derogation for hot branding that should, in practice, only apply to registered semi-feral Exmoor ponies and semi-feral ponies on Dartmoor and in the New Forest for identification purposes.

Moorland societies are committed to looking after the welfare of the ponies and so have taken the responsibility to develop a Code of Practice to ensure that the procedure of hot branding causes minimal pain, distress and suffering whilst providing robust visual identification of semi-feral ponies. As each moorland area is managed in a different manner grey boxes have been included alongside the code of practice highlighting the current, agreed practices for each of the moors. The Societies are grateful for the advice and input of a number of organisations and Defra staff towards the production of the Code of Practice and will continue to develop the Code by dialogue and review.

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1. USE OF HOT BRANDING

1. Hot branding should only be used for ponies belonging to one of the following groups where there is no alternative:

- For ponies that are semi-feral on Dartmoor
- Registered Exmoor ponies in semi-feral situations.
- Legally depastured ponies that are semi-feral in the New Forest.

The bodies responsible for semi-feral ponies, including stud book societies, should take responsibility for communicating that hot branding should not be used in other situations and will take appropriate action to prevent this. In the first instance these responsible bodies are The Dartmoor Commoners' Council, the Exmoor Pony Society, and the New Forest Verderers.

Those making use of the derogation in the Mutilation Regulations to identify semi-feral ponies should minimise pain, distress and suffering where possible and minimise the welfare concerns of this technique in accordance with the requirements of the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

Ideally a Veterinary Surgeon will be in attendance during branding. A Veterinary Surgeon is usually in attendance at all gatherings to implant microchips and will be able, in the context of their professional obligations, to help ensure the health and welfare of the ponies.

2. GATHERING, HANDLING AND RESTRAINT

The procedures used for the gathering, handling and restraint of semi-feral ponies should be carried out in such a way as to minimise handling of the animal at any time up to the point of hot branding.

2.1 Gathering

It takes skill, time and care to bring in a large group of ponies. Strategic points should be used each time the ponies are gathered. Ponies should be gathered via known routes wherever possible. Numbers and organisation vary by location.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Dartmoor – 93 pony keepers with ponies taken back to their individual holdings.· Exmoor – 17 Herds of ponies are taken back to their home farms in the autumn from 9 separate areas of the moor. Some commons have ponies belonging to several owners and, in some cases, ponies can move between commons.· New Forest - 40 drifts in the autumn to selected sites with purpose built handling systems. |
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2.2 Handling equipment

Mobile handling units and purpose built permanent handling systems should be suitable for safe and humane handling.

All handling facilities must be large enough to safely accommodate the number of ponies being brought in and have a suitable funnel system with facilities to enable a large group of ponies to be split into smaller groups as required. Penning should be strong, free from sharp objects, of sufficient height to prevent escapes, with various sections to facilitate minimal handling and protect from avoidable pain, injuries and agitation while confined.

A purpose made metal crush can be tailored to individual requirements but all crushes must ensure

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that legs cannot become trapped, neck clamps are not used and there is protection available for the head if a pony rears.

Owners and keepers of ponies should take responsibility for ensuring equipment is safe, humane and injury proof before each use.

- Dartmoor - A purpose built pen or crush as noted in Guidance from the Dartmoor Commoners' Council is generally accepted by the ponies with low level discomfort while branding is carried out swiftly, calmly and efficiently.
- Exmoor – The farms have Purpose built timber or metal funnel and penning facilities where the ponies can be split into smaller groups and individual pens for inspection and branding.
- New Forest - Purpose built timber pens at each site with handling facilities to inspect, worm, fit new fluorescent collars and brand the foals that are going back to the forest.

Only suitably proficient and approved people should carry out the procedures for restraint & branding. See section 4 for personnel training details.

- Dartmoor - Knowledge and experience of the procedures is handed down through the generations of moorland families with experienced handlers restraining the foal calmly. Guidance from the Dartmoor Commoners' Council states that new pony keepers must attend stallion inspection day and be overseen by experienced handlers.
- Exmoor – Two experienced handlers restrain the foal which may be haltered. Branding is carried out by inspectors, several of whom are veterinary surgeons, who have been trained and assessed for three years and have to attend regular refresher sessions to ensure they remain competent.
- New Forest – Two experienced handlers restrain the foal and branding is undertaken by an agister or experienced commoner.

It is recognised that the handling and restraint of semi-feral ponies for the first time is stressful and ***this handling and restraint is required for any form of identification***. Quiet, calm handling is essential with maximum care taken to ensure that ponies are not injured during handling. Humane handling must be observed at all times.

The moor or commoner's bodies responsible for ponies at each location should take the responsibility to ensure only suitably experienced people carry out the procedures for restraint & hot branding

2.3 Restraint

The restraint process should cause no injury to the animals. With the exception of a halter or head collar no artificial implements should be used for initial restraint and any manual restraint must not cause or have the potential to cause any physical harm or induce fear. As a last resort a soft nose-twitch could be used.

No horse is placed in a restraining pen unless the person who is to carry out the hot branding is ready to do so immediately after the animal is placed in the pen. The restraining pen should be of such a size and design, and able to be operated, as to protect the animal from any avoidable pain, suffering, agitation, injuries or contusions while confined in it or while entering.

3. HOT BRANDING EQUIPMENT

3.1 Brand shape and numbering/letters/symbols.

Responsible bodies should ensure branding irons should:

- Be of suitable metal and made by a suitably experienced blacksmith who understands the branding process
- Be correctly designed and balanced with a suitable surface area

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- Be the minimum overall size to enable them to be readable
- Have their visual condition checked at the beginning of each season
- Be of a smooth surface and made of any of the following metals within agreed dimensions.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dartmoor - Iron or mild steel – Must be visible and comply with the Guidance from the Dartmoor Commoners' Council.• Exmoor – Mild Steel 3.5 x 5.5 cm each character• New Forest – Mild Steel 5 x 7.5 cm overall brand size |
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Where possible open shapes, rather than closed, should be used in order to minimise unnecessary, pain, distress and suffering.

The numbers/letters/symbols used in hot branding should not be random and a record of the marks should be kept. The responsible bodies should ensure that these marks are linked to ownership and that contact details are readily available. This is to ensure that, as with microchips and freeze brands, owners, New Forest Verderers, National Park Rangers and local members of the public on Exmoor will know from the owners brand who to contact if there are welfare problems and injuries.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dartmoor - Registered with the Council as required by the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985• Exmoor – Exmoor Pony Society database details owners and their individual brands which are approved by the society and used by Society appointed inspectors. This information is available to the Exmoor National Park Rangers and those able to access the database.• New Forest – All owners have a brand approved by the verderers who keep a list of the brand marks. |
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It is recognised that the handling and restraint of semi-feral ponies for the first time is stressful. ***This is required for any form of identification.*** Quiet, calm handling is essential with maximum care taken. Only the minimum number of hot brands are to be used and only for essential identification purposes. Wherever possible the responsible bodies should direct that a single branding iron is to be used which is applied only once with a maximum of four characters (see Appendix 1 for examples)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dartmoor - Comply with Guidance from the Dartmoor Commoners' Council |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dartmoor Pony Society upgrading scheme (The Moorland Scheme run in conjunction with the Duchy of Cornwall) - has just a small triangle on the nearside for rump SR1 and on the offside rump for SR2.• Dartmoor Hill Pony Association - ponies are branded with the owner's mark as well as numbers identifying individual mares. The brands vary in size and positioning on the pony. All stallions must be accredited to the Commoners Council and have a herd identification brand and an approval mark, a circle with a cross in it.• No ponies, including Dartmoor Heritage ponies, shall be depastured on the Commons of Dartmoor without an identifiable visible mark as stated in the Dartmoor Commons act of 1985. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exmoor – Only ponies to be registered in the Stud Book and remain free living to be branded on the nearside hind quarter with a maximum of 4 characters to identify the breeder and the individual pony. A single symbol to be used wherever possible to identify the breeder.• New Forest – A letter and/or number combination on one iron e.g. DT or 22 or 9G, traditionally in the saddle area, that identifies the owner, in accordance with the bylaws, of the foals that are remaining on the Forest. |

4. PERSONNEL TRAINING AND COMPETENCY

All personnel carrying out the following operations should be trained and competent:

- Gathering, handling and restraint
- Hot branding
- Post-hot branding monitoring and care

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Branding irons should only be used by trained personnel. Training schemes or apprenticeships should be available for those involved in any of the above operations. Training schemes or apprenticeships should as a minimum include the following elements:

- Semi-feral ponies behaviour
- Handling and restraining techniques
- Use of hot brands
- Ensuring the health and safety of handlers at all times
- Monitoring of normal/abnormal hot brand markings
- Knowledge of what to do if things go wrong

Assessment of competence for those carrying out the operations listed above should take place before they undertake any unsupervised procedures.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Dartmoor – Apprenticeship within the family. Must be able to demonstrate competence and be registered with the Commoners Council recognising competency. Guidance from the Dartmoor Commoners' Council states that new pony keepers must attend stallion inspection day and be overseen by experienced handlers.· Exmoor – Training scheme to assess suitability as an inspector followed by 3 years working alongside a competent experienced inspector whose reports are considered by the EPS Council prior to appointment as an inspector.· New Forest – Training is undertaken by the agisters and approved commoners and competence assessed by an agister. |
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A record of trained and competent persons will be kept by the Dartmoor Commoners, The Exmoor Pony Society for Exmoor and the Verderers for the New Forest.

5. HOT BRANDING PROCESS

The process of hot branding should be carried out following the next steps and should not be carried out in the summer months:

- Quiet and calm handling is essential
- Foals are securely held by two handlers or in a crush.
- The hair is clipped over the brand site using scissors or shears.
- In the absence of definitive scientific information it is recommended that hot brands are consistently placed:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Dartmoor – Position of brands for quick recognition under the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 as detailed Guidance from the Dartmoor Commoners' Council· Exmoor – on the nearside Hind Quarter· New Forest - on the nearside saddle area |
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- Branding Irons are heated up either by a wood fire, gas torch or small burners outside the pen.
- The iron is evenly heated to cherry red and applied with firm and even pressure for between 1 and 4 seconds and the process is over just as the foal reacts to the discomfort. For this reason sedatives and analgesia should not be used.
- Consideration should be given to opinions that horse's skin thickness and sensitivity varies according to breed/time of year.
- The brand should only lightly penetrate the skin. The resulting scar alters the growth of the hair once the brand heals resulting in a permanent visual mark on the pony. There is usually no swelling or aftercare required.
- After branding the brand mark should be inspected and further monitored if required.
- The long term effectiveness of the brands and the branding process should be monitored by the bodies responsible for semi-feral ponies on the moor and in the forest.

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- Dartmoor – As in Guidance from the Dartmoor Commoners' Council cold cream can be applied.
- Exmoor & New Forest – advise that a hand is just run over it immediately post branding and, rarely, if aftercare is required, a gentian spray can be applied.

Summary

The bodies responsible for semi-feral ponies on the moor and in the forest take responsibility for implementing and developing this Code of Practice. Hot branding is only part of the overall management of semi-feral ponies. Alternative forms of identification will be kept under review by the bodies responsible for the ponies and as soon as a better alternative is found hot branding will be discontinued.

End of Code

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Appendix 1

ILLUSTRATION OF SOME COMBINED SINGLE APPLICATION BRANDS FOR UNIQUE IDENTIFICATION. USUALLY THE BOTTOM WILL ONLY BE 2 NUMBERS.



Top = Herd identity Bottom left to right = pony identity



Reading left to right First = herd identity Second to Fourth = pony identity. This is similar to a freeze brand.

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Appendix 2

FURTHER INFORMATION RELATED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE

Research Overview

Dr Madeleine Campbell past President of BEVA said "There is, unfortunately, no permanent method of equine identification which is entirely pain free at the time of application" "there is however a dearth of reliable experimental evidence on the absolute and comparative pain induced by hot branding and freeze branding and BEVA would welcome such studies." (Paper given at the Equine Forum in March 2010)

Shearwell Data, acknowledged experts in animal identification systems based on Exmoor, advise that 'on practicality and kindness to the animal is to remain with Hot Branding until such time as distance readable devices can be found'

Dr Mark Kennedy carried out a visual study but it was felt that, although valuable in some areas, it was not comprehensive and relied heavily on previous research much of which was done on cattle. Dr Kennedy suggested there are "welfare benefits as well as welfare harms" when considering branding.

The results of the recent study into the behavioural and physiological effects of hot iron branding in semi-feral ponies carried out in the New Forest are awaited. The research covered the assessment of the pony's behavioural response and the physiological effect of hot branding to include measuring skin temperature, pressure sensitivity and faecal cortisol.

Recently the reliability of lightly applied brands has been questioned and ongoing monitoring is required to ensure brands and their application are effective.

Additionally it is hoped that funding can be found to do a much more comprehensive study that would also measure responses to Freeze Branding, Micro-chipping and the initial handling of semi-feral foals along with measuring responses in well handled horses/ponies to the various identification methods.

Legislative Requirements

The Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007 currently allows Micro-chipping, Freeze Branding and Hot Branding. Ear tagging is not permitted.

DARTMOOR (1200 ponies & 93 owners) 25 Geldings Branded plus some 200 foals.

Regulation 5, pursuant to Dartmoor Commons Act 1985

Ponies and cattle are to be marked with a hot brand as this is found to be the quickest and least stressful identification for semi-feral hill stock. Sheep to be marked with an incised earmark and a paint mark on the body.

The Dartmoor Commoners Council (DCC) holds a register of commoners with stock running on the moor and the brand marks each uses for their ponies. It is against the law for a commoner to turn out stock without informing the DCC of the identification mark they are using. See Dartmoor Commons Act 1985.

EXMOOR (300 ponies & 15 owners) Some 120 foals branded each year.

Exmoor ponies are a Category 2 Rare Breed with a small gene pool and only some 500 breeding mares in the UK of which over half are on Exmoor. They all look very much alike and, under EU law,

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can only be registered in the Stud Book if from known registered parents. This requires visual identification of the foal with the dam which can then be confirmed by DNA verification. With microchips alone and virtually no white or distinguishing markings a foal can only be paired with its dam when it suckles and both brands can be read.

Each pony carries an owner's mark and its individual mark with a maximum of 4 characters branded. Just an owners brand would be meaningless. Branded ponies may leave the herds on the moor at some point in their lives. Ponies, particularly from the rarer bloodlines, bred 'in ground' may also be turned out with the herds and therefore need to be identified. Please see Appendix 1 for single brand possibilities.

NEW FOREST (4500 ponies & 600 owners) Some 200 foals branded each year.

Verderers bye laws All ponies "must be permanently visually marked so as to show at all times the owners identification mark as approved by and registered with the verderers"

REVIEW OF THE METHODS OF IDENTIFICATION THAT MAY BE SUITABLE FOR SEMI-FERAL PONIES NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

External Transponders

These can be attached to collar and are used to identify wild species in scientific research but are unlikely to be realistic proposition for ponies in the foreseeable future but the potential for this as an economical and viable way forward should be further explored. Transmitters can be in an ear stud but ear tagging is already forbidden and the battery life is too short for the timescales required.

Micro-chipping

This intrusive procedure that implants the microchip which can, with current technology, only be read with a scanner at close quarters (10-20 cm). A microchip has to be implanted by a Veterinary Surgeon as in the horse and pony it is implanted into the deep tissues of the neck, not under the skin as in dogs and cats.

Insertion of a microchip in the neck area is known to be potentially painful and analgesia is sometimes given. Considerable restraint is required for the implantation procedure to be carried out and, with semi-feral foals; it is not without risk to the veterinary surgeon. The differences in skin type and sensitivity, as with hot and freeze branding, affect the responses to the injection. Usually the semi-feral ponies will only be handled once in their lives as foals. For adult semi-feral ponies having to be caught and restrained in a crush for the microchip to be read every time identification is required would increase restraint stress.

Micro-chipping is not suitable for the sole identification of semi-feral ponies as the microchip can only be read with the scanner at a very close range. Richard Webber of Shearwell Data, experts in Animal Identification & Management Systems, makes the point that mistakes can be made. Scanning, if the handheld battery is low, could be diagnosed as no chip particularly if the chip has migrated; this has lead to multiple chips per animal. In any event with wild or semi wild animals the need for close handling causes unnecessary stress to the animal every time identification is wanted.

Use of microchips has generally been found to be reliable in domesticated horses and ponies, but experience has been less good in the more challenging circumstances of the moors. Pony foals are often quite small and the *ligamentum nuchae* is barely two inches deep which increases the risk of migration.

Breeders have reported the loss of some 12 microchips to the Exmoor Pony Society plus several that have migrated, one into the ear and another towards the jowl region which could only be read when the neck was stretched out. On Dartmoor out of 25 ponies in one group 3 microchips could not be found. Elsewhere on Dartmoor there is a 1 in 60 failure rate leaving no identification. Further information on failed microchips should be collected to include manufacturer, type of scanner used,

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age of the animal on implant etc.

Unlike the situation with most horses and ponies semi-feral foals are often wet and muddy when micro-chipped. This can lead to infection, abscess and expulsion of the microchip but to clean the site would add to the restraint stress and to the risk to the veterinary surgeon. Veterinary surgeons are unlikely to have subsequent evidence of infected microchip sites as this would be dealt with by owners, if they are able to observe this once the ponies are released to the moor.

A microchip cannot always be reliably identified quickly in an emergency as it also relies on the availability of a current up to date central database, not readily accessible in a remote moorland situation where mobile access to data may be difficult.

Collars

Collars can only be worn by a fully mature animal as it would not be safe or practical to fit a collar on to a foal and have to change it as it grows. The restraint stress associated with refitting collars regularly would also increase.

Some collars appear to break easily, some have a weak link to ensure they break if necessary, and are therefore lost while others do not break and may cause injury. Foals can become caught up in their mother's collars, ponies may get a hind leg into their own collar and they can become hooked up in bushes and trees causing serious issues if the collar doesn't break. This is anecdotal and evidence appears not to be available.

In the New Forest collars are used to help to prevent road traffic accidents. Of 1200 collars fitted annually at least 66% are lost and this could be as high as 72%.

Most importantly collars alone are not suitable for permanent identification; it would also be impossible to differentiate between ponies that had been abandoned or just lost their collar.

Freeze Branding

This is felt by some to be more acceptable than a hot brand but the question as to why this is so remains unanswered and the two need to be scientifically compared. Like the hot brand it gives greater protection from theft. Sedation or analgesia may be used. There would appear to be no formal training schemes for the freeze branding operatives. (Defra response 19/7/12)

- Freeze branding is considered to be unsuitable for foals and it takes up to 45 seconds per character to perform plus the time to shave away the hair.
- Each character is applied separately and a semi-feral foal could not be held still for the required time.
- The foals would react to the discomfort of the cold iron before the procedure is complete and their struggling would be a welfare issue and a safety issue for the operator.
- The liquid nitrogen would be dangerous in a holding pen with a semi-feral foal.
- Skin penetration is said to be deeper and there is also more swelling that needs to be monitored. It is therefore unsuitable for foals returning to a semi-feral situation. (See Basic Process below)

Freeze branding produces white hairs to give the readable mark. This is not suitable for grey ponies so the brand would need to be held on for longer to give a bald mark which is unacceptable for semi-feral ponies. The freeze branding companies make the point that brands should be kept clipped in winter; this would not be suitable for a semi-feral pony.

A freeze brand cannot be identified quickly in an emergency as access to the database operated by the freeze marking companies is only likely to be available during office hours.

Although micro-chipping is now compulsory a visible mark is still seen as a theft deterrent even for domestic situations. Freeze branding is normally used on domesticated horses to prevent theft.

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The basic process for freeze branding is:

The area of the horse to be branded is shaved while the cold iron is prepared in liquid nitrogen. The branding iron is then applied separately for each letter/number (usually 4) to be branded. The freeze branding process kills the cells that produce colour pigment resulting in the growth of white hair where the iron was placed.

- In 5 to 10 Minutes - Swelled pattern resembling frostbite shows
- There will be swelling for some 72 hours disappearing completely in around 5 days.
- The scabs should never be removed.
- After a month the top layer of skin sheds
- At around 2 Months the white hair starts growing in with growth complete in some 3 months

If there are any concerns the freeze marking company should be contacted immediately for advice and support. The freeze marking companies make the point that horses skin thickness and sensitivity varies according to breed/time of year etc. and no responsibility can be accepted for any unexpected or unusual reactions as a result of freeze branding.

Paint Marks

Have been used in conjunction with a microchip are also unsuitable as they are not permanent and would be lost in the spring and autumn as the coat changed.