

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Traceability for Cattle Disease Control

Some believe cattle traceability to be an invasion of privacy — learn why it's all about safety.

The ability to trace current and past locations of livestock to enhance disease control has been a goal of federal and state animal health agencies for many years.

Currently, permanent identification and health papers (Certificates of Veterinary Inspection) are required for breeding cattle crossing state lines. For the most part, it is not a requirement for movement within a state or for feeder cattle.

Animal traceability is not particularly important for some diseases, including common ones affecting nearly every herd and some non-contagious diseases.

However, diseases with current federal and state control programs such as bovine tuberculosis (TB), brucellosis (Bang's), and trichomoniasis (trich) could be more easily managed with an effective traceability system for cattle.

Even more importantly, if a disease currently absent from the U.S., such as foot-and-mouth disease (FMD), were to be introduced, the spread of it could be minimized by stopping the movement of cattle that were in contact with infected animals.

Once a contagious disease such as FMD is contained to known herds, an effective traceability system will be necessary to allow movement of cattle that are at low risk for spreading the disease.

Without a method to identify low-risk animals, all cattle must be treated as high-risk and movement restricted to avoid disease spread. Therefore, one of the most important reasons to implement an effective traceability system is to improve the ability of animal health officials to identify low-risk animals for movement as soon as possible and before a disease outbreak is completely controlled.

Disadvantages?

While there are many advantages for the cattle industry to implement a traceability system, there are also concerns. One concern is that it would slow cattle movement through auction markets and arrival at backgrounders, feedlots and packing plants. Also, collecting data raises concerns about privacy, particularly if competitors or opponents could gain access to data through Freedom of Information Act requests.

New types of electronic identification tags, greater computing capacity, and other technological advancements have improved the speed and accuracy that cattle can be identified so that a traceability system operating at the speed of commerce can now be a reality.

To help protect privacy, current thinking involves creating a private database controlled by livestock producers that collects the few pieces

of data necessary for disease-control purposes (the official electronic animal identification number, the GPS location where the tag was scanned, and the time and date when the tag was scanned).

This very specific set of data collected and maintained by the private entity can be provided to state or federal animal health officials in the event of an animal disease outbreak to speed the recovery process but would not be shared unless a qualifying disease outbreak is confirmed.

If all or most of the challenges confronting such a program can be overcome, livestock producers, animal health officials, and veterinarians will have a traceability system that, in the event of a serious disease challenge, will help identify and locate cattle that are at high risk. And it will help slow or stop the disease spread while also identifying cattle that are low risk so that movement and commerce can resume as quickly as possible.

Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kan.