

The Debate Over ID

The industry debates how it should implement a national ID program — and whether it really needs one.

BY ERIC GRANT

There's little doubt that, within a few years, most beef producers will have enrolled their cow herds in some type of an animal identification (ID) system. These systems most likely will promote and enable the seamless flow of performance, economic and health information from ranches and farms to other industry sectors. They'll also help add value to quality cattle produced in a consumer-oriented way.

What form this system — or these systems — will take remains to be seen.

Some believe ID systems should be voluntary and industry-driven, not mandated by government. Others believe a national, mandated ID system would make beef a better product for consumers, encourage greater information sharing between sectors, and enable the industry to fight and to prevent disease more effectively and to certify that their product is produced in a safe manner.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), which has long been a proponent of an industrywide animal ID system, believes it would go a long way in controlling the spread of disease.

APHIS also sees a national ID system as a powerful, proactive tool for

identifying the source of potential disease outbreaks, such as foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) or bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), if they ever were to happen in this country.

"Brucellosis and other livestock-disease-eradication programs are nearing completion in the U.S. We anticipate that in the next several years there will be a national void in cattle identification

unless there is a policy shift to animal identification," says John Weimers, national animal identification director for APHIS. "The public demands assurance that the products they consume are safe and wholesome. For this reason, the safety and authenticity of foods of animal origin must be traced and monitored."

The Clinton administration was fairly aggressive in its efforts to develop a mandated animal ID system. But it failed to gain passage of mandatory animal ID legislation in Congress and ran out of time to impose similar regulations on the industry this winter.

President Bush earlier this year placed a temporary moratorium on new regulations, and at least for now, the federal agency appears to be backing down on its threat to impose a mandatory program on the industry.

Mandatory vs. voluntary

When it does become reality, a national ID system most likely will take on one of two forms. It could be a singular, uniform system in which every producer is mandated to be involved. Or it could be a collection of voluntary, private industry efforts that would share a similar numbering system.

Opinions, to be sure, range widely.

"I favor a mandatory national ID system. It's the responsibility of every producer to create a great product," says producer Jeff

Ryan, Cresco, Iowa. "The ability to trace back to the owner of the animal for whatever reason — be it animal health, beef quality or food safety issues or production and performance data — is a benefit that every producer should seek. Unfortunately, I don't think we'd have a very good participation level if the program were entirely voluntary."

Others believe an ID system should be allowed to grow and to evolve, not just erupt through mandates, says Bob Bohlender, a veterinarian based in North Platte, Neb. Bohlender also serves on the national Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) Advisory Board. "Any ID program has to evolve for the right reasons. Just because somebody wants it doesn't mean it's doable."

Bohlender believes a national ID system must be built for all the right reasons and that it would be a mistake to implement it as a food safety measure. Tracing back problems from packing and processing plants would be a logistical nightmare. And because 45% of U.S. beef is processed through grinders, which can hold beef from hundreds of carcasses, it would be impossible to trace back the source of contamination or residues, he says.

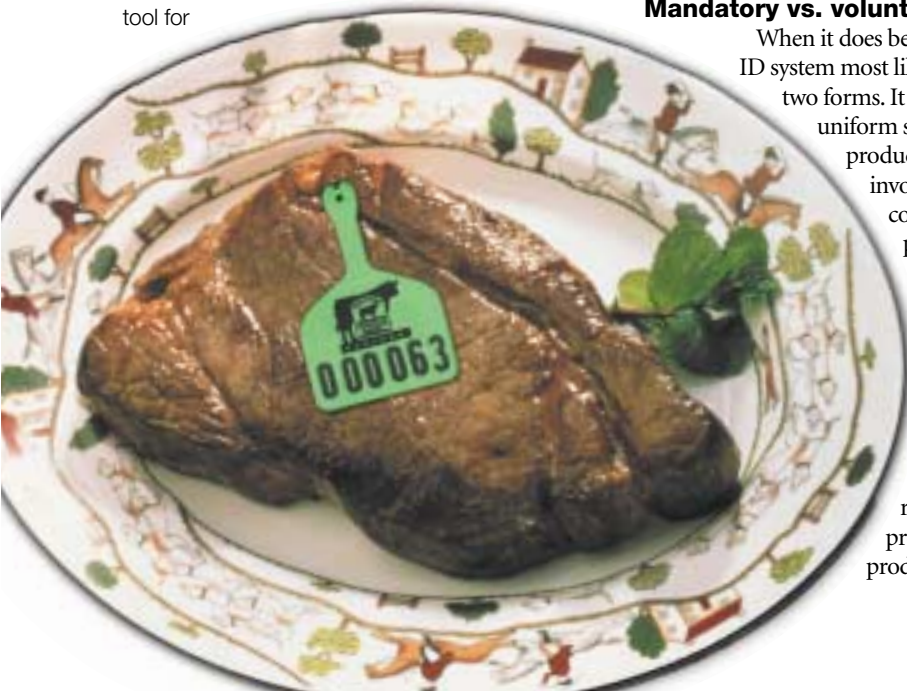
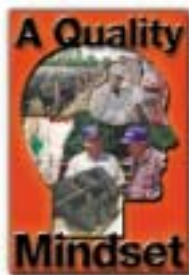
"In my opinion, packers are wanting ID to share their kill-floor problems with producers. The more partners they have to blame, the better off they are," Bohlender says.

He agrees that an ID system will play an important role in facilitating the flow of information for alliances. "I think ID can play a very significant role in helping producers produce a better, higher-quality product," he says. "But it has to be there for all the right reasons. But if it's just a plan to share responsibilities, it won't work."

Others believe the benefits of a national ID system far outweigh concerns over producer liabilities.

"The cost of doing nothing is too high. We as an industry can't wait until an animal disease crisis hits the U.S. and we see a 50% to 80% drop in beef consumption like parts of Europe have seen.

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We need to implement a voluntary national ID system for all the right reasons and increase producers' profit opportunities," says John Todd, Rollins Ranch, Okeechobee, Fla., who chairs the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) subcommittee on animal ID.

Angus role

Recognizing that industrywide animal ID someday will be a reality, seeing that there are obvious benefits to producers by having a system in place, and believing the effort should be controlled by producers — not government, the American Angus Association has become a leader in shaping its development and implementation.

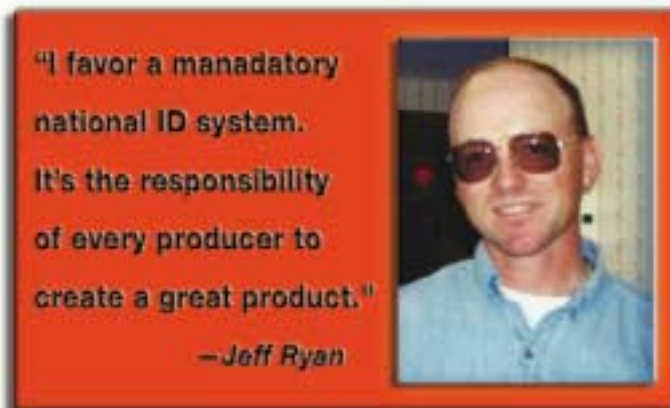
The Association believes that producers who adopt this technology will have much to gain by having a uniform system of identifying animals and that the flow of information from one sector to another ultimately

will add value to quality cattle.

"In our minds, instead of seeing a mandated system get passed down to beef producers, with no opportunity for their input, we would rather work with USDA-APHIS, NCBA and any other organizations having an impact on the development and implementation of a voluntary identification program," says Matt Perrier, assistant director of commercial relations.

"We feel producers who become involved in the Angus Beef Record Service (BRS) program are the same folks who are doing a lot of things right in their operations. They're managing their cattle safely and properly. They're breeding high-quality cattle. So in this respect, we don't see a national identification system as a liability, but as a tool that gives our system more reliability with source and process verification," Perrier says.

"It will provide our members and users of the Angus BRS



program with a way of distinguishing their animals as unique individuals, therefore adding value to the quality genetics that this breed has to offer," he adds.

The Association has been working with APHIS to lay the foundation for a system that would enable producers to identify each of their animals with a unique 15-digit American identification number (AIN). The AIN system would enable all producers to share a common ID system, allowing for improved flow of information from one buyer or sector to another.

APHIS has developed a databank of about 1 trillion AIN numbers for use from which breed associations, alliances and private companies can receive blocks of numbers for use in their own production systems.

The American Angus Association, for instance, recently received a bank of 1 billion AIN numbers. These are being used as ID numbers in the Angus BRS program and as a complementary numbering system for its purebred registration numbers.

An AIN remains in an animal's record for the duration of its life. Producers who use the system also can include the AIN number as part of their cattle's ear tags. But producers most likely will continue to use their own existing ID systems and couple the information with the AINs in their databases.

Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) sees advantages to animal ID systems, too, but like the Association, it does not favor mandatory ID. Instead, the CAB philosophy continues to be

centered on creating voluntary, industry-driven pull-through effects for both Angus cattle and the adoption of new and better technologies.

It's a philosophy that allows the marketplace — not government agencies — to determine what quality is and whether it will reward producers for producing this desirable quality, says Steve Suther, industry information director for CAB.

CAB also recognizes that animal ID will play a key role for the beef industry in the future, and it has taken proactive steps to build on its knowledge of animal ID technologies. CAB staff believe producers will begin to appreciate the power that a well-built animal ID system has to offer their operations. There will be Web sites where they can extract more data, such as postweaning performance on their calves. And by using this technology, producers will be able to see that some of their cows produce more-valuable animals than others and will select accordingly.

In addition, producers will use the information to extract higher relative prices for those with proven records for top-value production.

In a few years, Suther says, "potential performance and value of sets of cattle would be known to all bidders by private treaty, satellite or more conventional auction means. Everyone who makes a living in the beef industry would be intricately tied into the overall ID system, and there would be no more black holes for ID."

