

CattleTrace to Test Animal Traceability

Traceability program to help industry plan animal disease response.

by Troy Smith, field editor

Its purpose is to show that an industry-driven animal traceability program can work, providing for the common good while protecting the privacy of individual cattle producers. Dubbed CattleTrace, it's a proactive effort to develop a cowboy-friendly system enabling the cattle industry to respond rapidly to an animal disease threat.

"Animal disease traceability is knowing where diseased and at-risk animals are, where they have been and when they were at those locations," says program manager Cassie Kniebel, noting that CattleTrace will soon begin testing its capability for accomplishing all of that in a timely manner. Evaluation of its infrastructure is a step toward determining whether Kansas-based CattleTrace could be the model for an enhanced national program for tracing the origin and stopping the spread of a disease outbreak.

Since 2013, the animal disease traceability (ADT) program from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has required individual identification and accompanying interstate certificate of veterinary inspection (ICVI) for interstate movement of dairy cattle, cattle used for recreation, rodeo, show or exhibition, and sexually intact beef cattle that are 18 months

of age or older. Feeder cattle and fed cattle under 18 months of age remain exempt from those requirements, pending adoption of separate rules.

However, USDA has proposed implementation of individual identification to facilitate traceability of all cattle by January of 2023.

CattleTrace partners believe the best program would be one developed by the industry, on its own terms. Launched a year ago, CattleTrace is a collaborative effort of the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA), Kansas State University (KSU), the Kansas Department of Agriculture and USDA. Representatives of those entities serve on an advisory committee, but CattleTrace is governed by a board of directors consisting of ranchers, cattle feeders and an auction market operator. Collectively, they established three objectives: 1) develop an infrastructure; 2) evaluate the efficiency and capabilities of that infrastructure; 3) evaluate the costs and value of the program.

Tracking movement

According to Kniebel, the infrastructure for tracking cattle movement through the supply chain is based on the use of ultra-high frequency (UHF) electronic ear tags placed in participating producers'

calves by weaning time, or prior to commingling with cattle from other locations. To track calves' movements, tag-readers are installed at participating auction markets, feedyards and packing plants. To date, eight sale barns, 14 feedyards and four packing plants are participating. When animals enter these facilities, readers collect individual animal identification numbers, the GPS location, and the date and time.

"The UHF technology was chosen because it shouldn't interfere with the speed of commerce. Tag readers can either be mounted or hand-held and the tags can be read as cattle pass through an alley or chute," Kniebel explains. Data collection for participating producers' cattle began in the fall of 2018 and will continue through the spring of 2020. Kniebel says the project has attracted the attention of producers outside of Kansas too, including cattle folk from 11 other states.

Producers seem to like the program's narrow focus on disease traceability, with a bare minimum of data collected with technology that promises to maintain the speed of commerce. And rather than storing it in a government database, CattleTrace, Inc. was established as a private, not-for-profit entity to securely house the data. Because it is privately owned, the data is not subject to the Freedom of Information Act that applies to

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“public” information. Only the board of directors can decide when, how and with whom CattleTrace data is shared.

This spring and summer, significant numbers of participating producers’ cattle will have gone to harvest, completing their physical timeline. This allows for pursuit of the second of the program’s three objectives — testing of the infrastructure. According to CattleTrace chairman of the board and cattle feeder Brandon Depenbusch, the first mock traces will begin relatively soon.

“We’ll run simulated trace-back scenarios to see how well the system works,” Depenbusch says. “For example, let’s say a certain animal with an imaginary case of foot-and-mouth disease is found in my feedyard. We will trace that animal

back to its origin and find all the stops it made along the way. If it came through a certain sale barn, we can determine what other animals were there at about the same time, and where they came from. It should help determine which cattle (and operations) could have been at risk and which were not.”

According to Kniebel, KSU economists will address the program’s third objective by conducting an economic analysis, comparing costs and benefits. To gain widespread producer acceptance, the system needs to be simple, fast and affordable, while efficiently tracking all classes of cattle, including feeders.

“We call it a pilot project, but I like to think of it as the beginning of an expanded national (ADT) program,” says Ken Stielow, a Kansas rancher,

seedstock breeder and CattleTrace board member. He thinks increasing numbers of producers have come to believe that disease traceability is needed in the U.S.

“We’ll never see 100% buy-in,” Stielow adds. “Some producers think it’s intrusive and others just won’t like the way you want to do it. But it’s always been pretty hard to get all cattle producers to agree on anything. It could take a catastrophic disease outbreak to convince some people. I think more producers realize that this can help the industry, not only as an insurance policy against catastrophe, but as an aid to marketing. Most countries competing with us for international beef markets already have traceability. It needs to happen here.” 



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