

Listen & Learn

USDA listening session gives producers a chance to air their views on animal ID.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

In a change from the tongue-in-cheek adage of “We’re from the government, and we’re here to help you,” Bill Hawks, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) undersecretary for marketing and regulatory programs, said, “We’re not here to help you. ... We came from Washington to get you to help us.”

Hawks made the comment during one of a series of USDA listening sessions on the proposed National Animal Identification System (NAIS). Nearly 130 producers and state and government officials crowded into the Northeast Georgia Livestock Auction Barn in Athens June 18 to share their views with Hawks and John Wiemers, director of NAIS.

The 13 coast-to-coast sessions, which began June 14 and are scheduled to end Aug. 31, are timely. Wiemers said \$18.8 million has been transferred from USDA’s Commodity Credit Commission to NAIS to fund the development of a national animal identification (ID) system. The goal is to assign each cattle operation and marketing facility in the country a premises ID number by the end of 2004.

Commercial producer Bobby Lovett of Cuthbert, Ga., is for the idea. “Animal identification is of great benefit to all of us. I think the program should start out there on the farm with every calf that is born.”

He continued, “I want to see them [ID] all the animals in an operation. Those old cows are going to enter commerce, too.”

For the animal ID program to benefit producers, Lovett said, “That database, or information, needs to be accessible to the producer. The database has no limits. USDA could combine the production records from birth through the packing plant, including the carcass weight and quality grade.”

While Jim Collins, executive vice president of the Georgia Cattlemen’s Association and a fifth-generation cattle producer, is also behind the idea of animal



► **Bill Hawks, undersecretary of marketing and regulatory programs for USDA, gets input from Farmington, Ga., producer Amy Rosen. Hawks came to Athens, Ga., to get producer input on the proposed National Animal Identification System.**

ID, he told Hawks and Wiemers, “The system has to be simple at the producer level. We need to test any type of system at the grassroots level so the system will be producer-friendly.”

He also said the program needs built-in



► **NAIS Director John Wiemers shares information with producers at a June 18 USDA listening session.**

flexibility to handle the differences between regions. Small, part-time operations in the Southeast work entirely different from range operations in the West, he said.

Facing challenges

Producers at the listening session also emphasized challenges facing small producers.

“Most of the people in this area don’t have a true vaccination program,” said Farmington, Ga., producer Amy Rosen. “Typically, they don’t get their cattle up until it is time to sell them.”

She says most of the producers she knows are older, have small operations, and/or don’t have the facilities to work their cattle. “If the calves have to be tagged at birth, you’ll lose a lot of those producers.”

Rosen suggested, “Put a headcatch in the pen at the sale barn. Tack on the fee for tagging to what it costs to sell the cow. The burden of recordkeeping has to go to the producer, but the burden of identifying can be handled at the sale barn.”

Market operators also expressed their concerns. Graydon Bobo, owner/operator of the Wilkes County Stockyard in Washington, Ga., said, “Nothing has been mentioned about cost sharing on the technology, helping the markets or dealers that are going to have to buy this technology and install it. And in some cases, modify our facilities. Some of our markets are looking at \$50,000 to implement this system.”

Bobo also said he was concerned about the confidentiality of the system. He said the only people who need access to the information are Animal and Plant Health Inspection System (APHIS) personnel and state veterinarians.

Wiemers told the producers and market operators the system will protect their privacy.

“We’re talking about the data that’s required for animal health control or epidemiology. We need to know where the event occurred. We need to know what date it was there. We need to know a little about the event taking place,” he said. “So if we have a system that reports when an event is conducted, say its movement in or out of a herd, we can keep track of the date that it

happened, the animal identification number, the location and the event itself.

“That’s all we really need. We don’t need to know the price paid for that animal, its information, its weaning weight. That’s proprietary and should stay in the private sector,” Wiemers added.

In the case of an animal disease outbreak, he said, a system that documents where the animals have been will save a lot of time and money, as well as forego producer imposition required by having to come to the farm and test cattle.

“The quicker we can respond, the quicker we can get back on good terms with our trading partners,” Wiemers added. “We’re talking about millions and millions of dollars a day.”

The goal of the animal ID system is to trace any animal back to its home operation within 48 hours. However, Wiemers also emphasized the system should not prevent producers from using the information for marketing and value-added programs.

He also noted the possibility for private industry to come up with a technology-neutral system. The machines at cash registers that handle credit cards from different companies are a prime example.

After the listening session, John Stuedemann, Comer, Ga., Angus breeder, commented, “If it can be done reasonably, it can do nothing but help us. It is good for us to know where our animals go, and we all need to be responsible in terms of production.

“Of course, the major reason for animal identification is to aid in tracking animal



► Jim Collins, executive vice president of the Georgia Cattlemen’s Association, gives his views on the proposed NAIS.

disease,” he continued. “It is extremely important in light of what could happen with either a natural disease outbreak or a terrorist activity. The only way to do that is have an identification and tracking system.”

Stuedemann said the American Angus Association is already ahead of the game with its AngusSource tagging program. “Even though the voluntary program was developed mainly to add value to Angus cattle, it is a good idea.”

The Angus breeder added, “Purebred breeders are accustomed to dealing with animal identification. These people could serve as a core group to get this thing going.”



► Angus breeder John Stuedemann (left) visits with Georgia Cattlemen’s Association president John Callaway at the listening session in Athens, Ga.