Animal Disease Traceability

Changes to rules discussed at Denver forum.

*Story & photos by **Troy Smith,** field editor*

It isn't so much the concept of animal disease traceability that spooks livestock producers. Most of them understand the benefits of having a way to trace the previous whereabouts of an animal diagnosed with a dangerous disease and the capability to take steps to control its spread. However, how a system of traceability is implemented can cause some concern. Some producers fear the devil is in the details.

The further development of USDA's Animal Disease Traceability (ADT) program, as it applies to cattle, was the focus of the Strategy Forum on Livestock Traceability, hosted Sept. 26-27 in Denver, Colo. Hosted by the National Institute for Animal Agriculture (NIAA) and the U.S. Animal Health Association (USAHA), the Forum featured a discussion of potential changes to the current ADT program. While there were relatively few cattle producers present, concerns from the country also were aired — concerns similar to those voiced in response to the National Animal Identification System (NAIS).

Remember NAIS? First proposed in 2002, the NAIS was USDA's first approach to a program for animal disease traceability. The plan was prioritized by USDA following the 2003 diagnosis of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in the United States. The NAIS goal was to establish a system for identifying all livestock, individually or by groups, and all premises where livestock production occurred. In the event of a disease outbreak, animal health officials could then use the information stored in a national database to trace an affected animal's movement all the way back to its place of birth.

►Working group members favored adoption of electronic radio frequency identification (RFID) tags as the official form of identification, said Marty Zaluski, state veterinarian with Montana Department of Livestock.

As proposed, NAIS ignited considerable controversy. USDA abandoned the centralized plan in favor of the ADT program that allowed individual states and tribal nations to choose their own methods for in-state traceability of animals and maintain their own systems of data collection and storage. Under ADT, however, USDA did require that all animals moving interstate be accompanied by a form of identification allowing traceability to the state or tribal nation of origin.

The federal Traceability for Livestock Moved Interstate rule went into effect in March 2013, requiring official identification for interstate movement of the following: all sexually intact cattle and bison that are 18 months of age or older, all dairy cattle, all cattle and bison used for rodeo or recreational events, and all cattle used for shows or exhibitions.

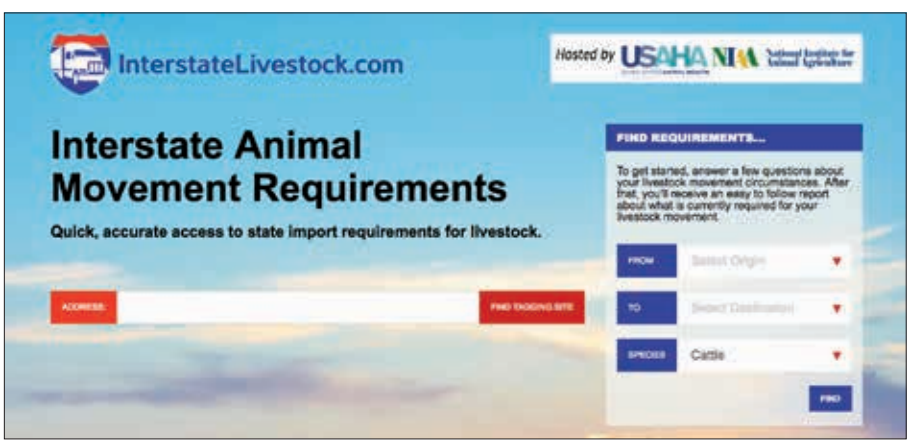
Possible changes

During 2017, a working group consisting of state and federal animal health officials was tasked with reviewing the ADT program, and conducted a series of nine public meetings to hear public feedback regarding successes and shortcomings of the ADT framework. The working group will make recommendations for updating the program to enhance traceability. While they have not been finalized, some preliminary recommendations were presented during the Denver forum.

Montana State Veterinarian Marty Zaluski said a consensus of working group members favored adoption of electronic radio frequency identification (RFID) tags as the official form of identification. Currently, National Uniform Eartagging System (NUES) tags are the official tag. Also known as "brite" tags, the small metal tags are similar to those associated with calfhood vaccination against brucellosis.

Typically, animals must be restrained in order for NUES tags to be read and recorded, which presents opportunity for injury to animals and handlers. According to Zaluski, manual tag-reading is a slow process and too often results in transcription errors. In his opinion, the only advantage offered is the low cost of the tags.

"But the metal tags are only low-cost to manufacture and buy, but not in practical-



►Hosted by the U.S. Animal Health Association and the National Institute for Animal Agriculture, *www.interstatelivestock.com* provides a source of state-by-state livestock transport information, including requirements for identification and health inspection.

application usefulness to the program," stated Zaluski, calling loss of information a significant cost of their use. "We can't move forward without electronic ID, and, long-term, it will be less costly."

The working group's preliminary recommendation is for adoption of an electronic identification system utilizing standardized technology that achieves minimum performance standards, ensures compatibility of electronic devices across manufacturers and works at the speed of commerce. Agreeing that a timeline is needed to motivate implementation, the working group favors full adoption of electronic tags for official ID by Jan. 1, 2023.

Another recommendation calls for changing the rules language such that official identification be required for cattle entering "interstate commerce" as opposed to "interstate movement." Accordingly, official identification would be triggered at change of ownership, first delivery to a site of commingling with cattle from other locations, or interstate movement, whichever occurs first.

►**"Including beef feeder cattle in the official identification requirement will be important in the long term," said Neil Hammerschmidt, manager of the animal disease traceability program for USDA Veterinary Services. "For now, though, the priority is to address issues related to classes of cattle currently covered."**

Feeder cattle are not subject to official identification under ADT, a fact that working group members see as a significant gap in the system. However, members are not recommending that feeders be included anytime soon.

"Not yet," said Neil Hammerschmidt, ADT program manager for USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services Veterinary Services (APHIS VS). "Including beef feeder cattle in the official identification requirement will be important in the long term. For now, though, the priority is to address issues related to classes of cattle currently covered."

However, just making RFID tags the official means of identification raises some of the same questions raised all those years ago in response to the proposed NAIS plan. Producers want to know what kind of electronic system will be chosen. They want to know who will have custody of the database. They want to know the implications for data confidentiality and producer liability. The big question is twofold: What's it going to cost? And who pays for it?

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Editor's Note: *Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.*