

Time to Do Something

General manager of 6666 Ranch asks for partnership of producers and officials on animal disease traceability.

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

Joe Leathers crawled out of a teepee bedroll, drove to an airport and climbed aboard a jet bound for Denver. Though based in Guthrie, Texas, the general manager of 6666 Ranch had been helping wean calves on a remote leased property in Montana, but Leathers thought it was important to honor his commitment and attend the Strategy Forum on Livestock Traceability.

Leathers had been asked to share his views with an audience gathered to discuss animal disease traceability as it applies to cattle. Hosted Sept. 26-27 and organized by the National Institute for Animal Agriculture (NIAA) and the U.S. Animal Health Association (USAHA), the event attracted an audience consisting largely of federal and state regulatory veterinarians, plus agency folk representing USDA and various state departments of agriculture. There were a few people present on behalf of the Livestock Marketing Association (LMA) and others representing a handful of state cattlemen's associations.

There were very few cattle producers in the audience — a fact not lost on Joe Leathers. He lamented the scarcity of bonafide industry “stakeholders” in attendance. Leathers also gently chastised the regulatory personnel that are seeking a way to implement a more comprehensive framework for USDA's Animal Disease Traceability (ADT) program. Why, he asked, have no cattle producers been involved in forming recommendations for updating ADT?

Prior to Leathers' presentation, the importance of traceability and the challenges associated with implementation of the ADT program had been discussed by USDA and state agency bureaucrats — members of a working group charged with making recommendations for improvement. A series of listening sessions were convened during the past spring and summer to gather producer feedback, but no producers actually serve on the working group that will help forge the future of ADT. In Leathers' opinion, that's just wrong.

“I see the need for traceability,” said Leathers, calling traceback capability a form of risk management. “We live in a world today where terrorist attacks can happen at any moment. They could involve anthrax, hoof-and-mouth or some other disease.



► Joe Leathers says electronic identification is necessary to move ADT forward, and his experience shows that it also carries potential for improved ranch profitability, based on the data ranchers can capture for use in management.

That's just a fact of life. It's also a fact that we could better handle a disease situation if we could know where cattle came from and where they've been.”

Action needed

Leathers said he also understands the challenges associated with implementing ADT. He noted how it's been talked about for years. During that time, the dialogue hasn't changed much.

“I did not hear one proposal for a solution at this meeting,” stated Leathers. “We're still talking about the challenges, and we have been since 1998. It's time to do something, so how do we make it happen?”

Leathers has a broad frame of reference, having grown up on a small 50-cow and cotton farm, then worked his way up from cowboy to management at “The Sixes.” He guided the operation through drought, holding herd genetics together by sending more than 4,000 cows to leased properties in Montana, Wyoming, Nevada and Nebraska. When the drought broke, Leathers held on to some of those leases. Now, 6666 Ranch manages a base herd of about 12,000 cows on a million acres, in multiple states.

“Maybe it was in God's plan for me to learn how to move cattle across state lines,”

said Leathers, explaining how the ranch implemented an individual animal identification system using radio frequency identification (RFID) tags. Now, with a data-management system in place, “wandering” a cow to read her number gives Leathers access to information including whether a cow was home-raised or purchased (and where), her genetic history, where she is and where she's been, her health/vaccination history, and her stage of production.

Leathers says electronic identification (eID) is necessary to move ADT forward, and his experience shows that it also carries potential for improved ranch profitability, based on the data ranchers can capture for use in management. It just depends on whether ranchers use the information to their advantage.

The biggest hurdle to jump, in Leathers' opinion, is the mentality of people — and maybe cowboys in particular.

“They're reluctant to change. They are often frustrated with new technology, because it scares them. But that can be overcome; it just takes a little time to get comfortable with something new or different,” said Leathers. “I used to think I didn't need a cell phone or a computer, but now my wife and I each have an iPhone and a laptop.”

Trust

A challenge that must be addressed, Leathers opines, is the relationship between cattle producers and government bureaucracy. Their collective history of dealing with government makes producers skeptical and, often, defensive. For ADT to progress, real effort must be put forth to build a partnership between federal and state officials and producers — a partnership built on trust.

“So how will this group move forward with traceability?” Leathers asked his audience. “I don't believe you ever will unless stakeholders put it together.”

He suggested that a task force be chosen to plan the future of ADT. He recommended that it include two representatives from each of the various industry segments — cow-calf, stocker and feedlot — with one being a small operator and the other a large operator. Additionally,

there should be two members, each, representing the auction markets and packing industry.

“Add a couple of members from this group (federal and state agency personnel) to act as consultants, and appoint a mean chairman to keep them all on track,” advised Leathers. “Then, eat the elephant one bite at a time. Put together a prototype, test it to work out the bugs, and then take it to the industry.”

In closing, Leathers recommended that an eID system be chosen that allows use of a single eartag for traceability and in-herd data management. Forget the metal bite tags that

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must be read manually. Figure out how to handle lost tags and determine when and where tagging should be done.

“Don’t make the program so rigid that it prevents buy-in by stakeholders (producers),” added Leathers. “Make it voluntary and get it started.”



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