Animal ID

Hits High Gear

A recent BSE case is making politicians push the gas pedal.

by Boyd Kidwell

After listening to a presentation on the National Animal Identification System (NAIS), Lenuel Chamberlain is sold on the idea. Chamberlain and his wife, Kathy, own Deep Creek Farms, a registered Angus operation near Yadkinville, N.C.

"I think that national animal identification (ID) is a good idea," Chamberlain says. "Health officials need to be able to track animals if there is a disease problem."

Of course, some producers at the same meeting remained dead-set against the idea of registering their farms and cattle with the government.

"It could drive people out of the beef business if they're not serious enough to make the investment," says North Carolina Extension beef specialist Phil Rucker, who gave the NAIS presentation at the Chamberlains' farm.

As Rucker suggests, the time is coming across the country for producers to get serious about animal ID. By January 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) expects all livestock owners to have their premises registered; by 2009, USDA wants every animal identified as part of the NAIS database. This program is viewed by USDA as an animal disease surveillance program, not a food safety issue.

Controlling information

In a way, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), an organization founded partly on the basis of keeping government out of the cattle business, favors a national animal ID system. NCBA says that being able to track cattle is a way to help restore U.S. beef exports. U.S. cattle producers have lost billions of dollars during the past few years from export markets that have been closed in the wake of discovering bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in the United States. Major competitors in the world beef trade, such as Australia and Canada, already have national ID systems in place and use cattle traceability as a beef marketing tool.

However, NCBA wants a faster timeline for an animal ID system, and the cattlemen want an entity other than USDA to keep the information. In October, NCBA plans to start operating an industry-managed animal ID system. The cattlemen's organization says that this system can meet the government's need for 48-hour traceback, and, at the same time, limit access to producers' private information. NCBA leaders fear that a government-controlled database could be forced under the Freedom of Information Act to release private information of cattle producers. NCBA plans to begin operating a pilot system in October 2005 and to offer a full-scale animal ID program in January 2006.

"Rather than USDA [controlling] the database, we think the information should be held by a consortium made up of private industry interests," says Allen Bright, a Nebraska feedlot operator and chairman of the NCBA animal ID committee. "For a voluntary program to be successful, it will have to be market-driven. There are opportunities for producers in the international market and from companies that want source-verified beef."

Advancing the timeline

In the wake of the recent positive BSE cow in Texas, members of Congress were quick to call for an acceleration of NAIS timelines. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.), the chairman of the House Ag Committee, says he wants an animal ID system in place as soon as possible. Goodlatte favors an industry plan to form an animal ID database that would control the information until USDA needs it. Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) called for USDA to speed up its timeline for an NAIS capable of 48-hour tracing of cattle movement and location.

In a statement issued after the second case of BSE was confirmed in the U.S., the congresswoman said, "We must also work to initiate a national animal tracing system that will ensure containment of BSE and many other animal diseases. If our country had such a system in place, like so many other countries already have, we would have crucial information at the time of an outbreak."

Expressing reservations

With so much uncertainty surrounding

Go to the source

Through its AngusSource℠ program, the American Angus Association can help producers prepare for the National Animal Identification System (NAIS). AngusSource provides both radio frequency identification (RFID) tags and visual ID ear tags that carry the 15-digit NAIS numbers. Although the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) remains neutral on the technology required to identify cattle in the NAIS, most people in the industry say RFID tags are the most likely way that cattle will be identified.

For the time being, AngusSource participants can use the program's visual ear tags with confidence that those tags will be grandfathered into the NAIS. The visual AngusSource tags are $1 each. Visual ID tags with matching RFID tags are $3.25 per set.

For more information on AngusSource, visit *www.angussource.com*.

Q&A on animal ID

Here are some common questions and answers regarding the proposed National Animal Identification System (NAIS):

► Why is a national system needed?

NAIS will help protect U.S. livestock from foreign and domestic disease threats. Finding sick or exposed animals early in an outbreak is essential for eradicating the disease. Foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) are well-known examples of diseases that require rapid traceback of animal movements. In emergency situations, many other diseases also require quick traceback. Each hour that passes means that a larger area is involved and more animals must be quarantined in an emergency.

► Why is 48-hour traceback important?

Because animals can be quickly transported around the United States, it is essential to track and contain diseases within 48 hours. Quickly identifying the source herds of diseased animals also assures consumers that steps are being taken to protect the food supply.

► How will animals be identified?

Under the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposal, every animal would have a 15-character individual number, and each premises would be identified through a seven-character number. USDA has not specified how each species will be identified, but cattle producers will probably use ear tags for identification (ID), possibly radio frequency ID (RFID) tags. There are also proposals to use branding or group lot ID.

► Who will pay for the ID tags?

USDA spent $18 million on NAIS in 2004 and has budgeted $33 million for 2005. However, this is a small part of the total expense. Industry and government are expected to share much of the costs. But, producers will need to buy the ear tags and will be responsible for tagging cattle. The RFID tags cost $2 to $3 each.

► At what point should animals be identified?

During the phase-in period, animals will need to be identified when they leave premises. As the NAIS develops, identification will be the responsibility of the owner where the animals are born.

► Who will have access to NAIS information?

How this data will be used is a tremendous source of concern among cattle producers. USDA promises that only federal, state and tribal health officials will have access to the information that is collected for the NAIS. Health officials may access the data to use in disease programs [such as tuberculosis (TB) or brucellosis (Bang's disease)] or when serious animal disease outbreaks are reported and require epidemiological investigations. Health officials may also access the database during emergency response simulations. The NAIS information is not to be used for the country-of-origin labeling (sometimes referred to as COL or COOL) program or by government agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

► What species are included in the NAIS?

Cattle and bison, farm-raised cervids (deer and elk), camelids (llamas and alpacas), equines, goats, poultry, sheep, and swine will be included. Methods of ID are being considered that are best suited to each species. For example, RFID tags are the most commonly suggested way of identifying cattle, but horse owners will use some other way of identifying their animals.

► Will premises numbers be needed for each species?

No, a single premises number covers animals of all species.

► Is this program mandatory?

In the past, USDA called for a voluntary program that could be used to work out a national system. However, USDA recently proposed that every livestock operation should have a premises ID number registered by January 2008 and that all animals should have individual ID numbers by January 2009. A comment period on the proposed NAIS was to end in July.

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animal ID, the Livestock Marketing Association (LMA) has expressed practical reservations about the NAIS. LMA wants it made clear that identifying animals for sale would be the livestock owner's responsibility. LMA is also concerned about the costs of NAIS and the methods of ID to be used. Until pilot projects presently under way are well-evaluated, the NAIS should remain voluntary, LMA recommends.

"Who will pay, and how much?" asks John McBride, LMA director of information.

"We're in favor of disease traceback, but we haven't seen enough results from these pilot projects to endorse this program. Until we're convinced the technology is ready, we need to move slowly."

Blake Wisher of Chester, S.C., should get a firsthand look at the NAIS technology at work. Wisher operates Chester Livestock Exchange and plans to hold one of the first NAIS demonstration sales in the Southeast.

"We know that animal identification will

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eventually be mandatory, and we want to be on the front end," Wisher says.

Wisher's biggest concern with the NAIS is that he estimates more than half of the cattle coming into his livestock market won't be tagged for ID. Many producers in his area don't even have handling facilities where they can tag cattle. To meet the demand for tagging, Wisher will have to upgrade his working facilities at the stockyard to rapidly handle more animals. He's also concerned about who will pay for the software and equipment needed to run the ID system.

"My big concern is that stockyards will be the ones to implement the ID program. Then our commissions must go up to cover the costs, and it makes us look like the bad guys," Wisher says.

The lack of handling facilities is a common concern across the Southeast. "Most of the negative talk in our area comes from producers who lack management facilities," points out North Carolina State Extension agent Amy Thomas. "The producers who have handling chutes support animal identification."

Regardless of what obstacles need to be overcome, the discovery of a BSE-positive

cow in Texas and the problems USDA encountered tracing the animal back to its original herd have once again placed the NAIS in the public spotlight.

"This latest incident should convince

more people that animal ID is a good idea. With this kind of system, it won't take so long to identify and trace an animal if there's a problem," Chamberlain says.

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How to Start

According to the proposed U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) requirement of January 2009, producers should have plenty of time to get ready for the National Animal Identification System (NAIS). Here's how to get started:

▶ **Premises ID.** Each livestock farm will eventually need a national identification (ID) number. Registration begins this year in most states. Extension offices and state departments of agriculture can provide information about premises ID registration.

▶ **ID tags.** Use visual tags this year and begin looking into radio frequency ID (RFID) ear tags. USDA says that it won't require a specific technology. But, insiders say RFID is the technology of choice. Cattle software programs are available to help transfer and store information from RFID tags to computers.

▶ **Pilot projects.** The Southeastern Livestock Network LLC (SLN) recently started a supply chain verification project that rewards owners who can verify the origins of cull cows and bulls. Electronic ID (EID) tags are used to track these animals from auction markets through harvest. The SLN also holds source-verified feeder sales in 10 states. The Northwest Pilot Project is testing multiple ID processes with producers in seven states.

▶ **Mandatory ID.** Unless there's a major disease outbreak, don't worry about a mandatory government program for 2005. USDA's goal for this year is to have livestock operations registered with premises ID numbers.

You can find information on the NAIS at *www.usda.gov/nais.* Your local Extension office should be able to provide a phone number to reach your state premises registration program.

Although birth dates aren't required by NAIS, it's a good idea to record calf birth dates this year. Due to international bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) concerns, beef export programs are probably going to require certification that animals are under a certain age at harvest. Feedlots and order buyers may soon be asking for age verification at the time of sale.