

ID Update

Livestock industry agrees a national ID and tracking system is needed, yet disagrees about the details.

by Meghan Soderstrom

This has to be a federal, state and industry partnership, because none of us can do this alone," Chuck Lambert, deputy undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Marketing and Regulatory Programs, reminded attendees at the 2005 ID/Info Expo in Chicago, Ill., Sept. 27-29.

The conference and trade show, hosted by the National Institute for Animal Agriculture (NIAA), brought together more than 500 people to share opinions, comments and questions on the direction of the National Animal Identification System (NAIS).

NAIS will individually identify animals and track their lifetime movements in a national database accessible to state and federal animal health authorities. The system will enable 48-hour traceback to point of origin while identifying all exposed animals and premises in the event of foreign or domestic animal disease.

Public vs. private

USDA received more than 600 written responses to the NAIS draft, which was open for public comment until July 6. John Clifford, deputy administrator for the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Veterinary Services (VS) program, presented a summary of the responses on Sept. 28.

Opinions were sharply divided on the database's management. When all comments were considered, 48% favored a publicly held database, while 36% favored a private one. However, when responses were narrowed to just livestock producers, preferences reversed, with 54% for a private system and 39% for a public one. Even more specifically, when results were tabulated only from cattle producers, the desire for a private system was even stronger. Clifford said 60% of cattle producers supported a private system while 33% supported a federal one.

Producers advocating a private system pointed to confidentiality as their chief concern with a USDA-maintained database.

Ken Olson, an animal health consultant to the dairy industry, said a private database still wouldn't resolve confidentiality concerns

because once state and federal health officials access the information, it would be subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Clifford agreed the data's confidentiality "could be challenged in court" and "may require legislation" to protect it.

Database holder proposals

Since Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns' announcement Aug. 30 that USDA would hand over the database to the private sector, several organizations have offered to manage it. Among them is the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA).

"NCBA should act as a catalyst to develop a nonprofit animal ID consortium"

to lead the identification program and manage the database, said Mike John, NCBA president-elect.

Similarly, Clifford said USDA believes "progress must continue to develop an independent, nonprofit, legal entity to be the private data holder."

He elaborated that the data holder must be "cross-representational from all species groups and markets," which drew concern from conference attendees about NCBA's role in developing the consortium. John said NCBA would hand control over to the consortium after developing it. Still, some attendees suggested that an existing multispecies organization, such as NIAA, should manage the identification program and database.

USDA was to announce more specific requirements of a privately held database at a mid-October meeting. John indicated that NCBA plans to announce members of the suggested consortium at that meeting.

Mandatory vs. voluntary

The NAIS draft proposed a mandatory system taking effect by 2009. Public comments received by USDA indicated 54% of respondents supported a mandatory system, Clifford said.

He also said participation is key to the program's disease surveillance success. "Our ability to achieve 48-hour traceback will be directly affected by the percentage of animal movements we are able to record," he noted.

However, John indicated that the consortium would propose a voluntary program instead. Conference attendees expressed strong concerns about the effectiveness of a voluntary system to track animal diseases.

Take action

More than 120,800 premises have been registered in 50 states, five tribes and two U.S. territories, but Lambert estimates that there may be 1.3 million total premises. Neil Hammerschmidt, NAIS project manager for APHIS VS, said NAIS was awarded \$33 million for fiscal years (FY) 2005 and 2006, with \$14 million of it in cooperative agreements with states and tribes to support premises registration. Producers are urged to take the following steps as soon as possible.

1. Register your premises with your state veterinarian or state department of agriculture to obtain your seven-character premises identification number (PIN). A full list of state contacts is available at www.usda.gov/nais under the "Contact your state or tribe" box.

2. Identify each animal with an animal identification number (AIN) tag. The cattle working group recommends a radio frequency identification (RFID) tag be placed in the left ear. Multiple manufacturers offer acceptable (ISO 11784 or 11785) tags, which include the U.S. country code (840) and a 12-character AIN.

3. Report animal movement. The cattle working groups suggest three basic events will trigger reporting: change of ownership, interstate movement or commingling animals from multiple premises.

