



Can Animal ID Be Confidential?

Ag Secretary discusses NAIS at ID Info Expo.

by Abby White

Maybe it's because producers don't like to brag about how many cattle they have. Or maybe it's because they have to keep information on herd size private to be competitive. Whatever the reason, Mike Johanns, secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), assured industry representatives that the information obtained through the implementation of a national animal identification (ID) system (NAIS) would be kept confidential.

"Number one, I understand producers' desire to maintain confidentiality in this area," Johanns said Aug. 23 during the National Institute for Animal Agriculture (NIAA) ID Info Expo Conference in Kansas City, Mo. "I grew up on a farm, and to my father, there was nothing more private than how many cows he was milking at a given time and how many sows he farrowed last week. He would never have thought of sharing that information with anyone."

Johanns said that this is a system that is going to be built to protect the confidentiality of the nation. He has directed the Animal and Plant Health Inspection

Service (APHIS) to create an animal ID system that would hold information about animal movement in the private sector and in state databases for those states choosing to utilize a statewide database.

Animal movement information registered in the private animal tracking databases will be private, not part of USDA records. The USDA will not release that information because it won't control it. Only in the event of an animal disease outbreak will the USDA ask for that information to be supplied by private industry, Johanns said.

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— Mike Johanns

Johanns's speech was part of the three-day conference provided by the NIAA that featured the latest information on the NAIS system, state projects, and other ID and information systems technologies. The attendees listening to Johanns's speech had various roles in the agricultural industry — from producers to consumers, and each segment in between.

"I'm here first and foremost to tip my hat to you," Johanns said. "You have been a key part in really an incredibly complex, phenomenal effort to coordinate, collaborate, educate and move forward with the National Animal Identification System."

Making progress

Although there are still a few naysayers who oppose the NAIS, Johanns said that, by and large, the industry recognizes the need for it. He said he realizes it is no small task. He compared how countries like Canada and Australia implemented an ID system and explained how the U.S. could use them as

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models. After comparing the sizes of their herds vs. those in the U.S., he noted there is a lot of work to be done.

"I am very pleased about the progress that has been made," Johanns said. "Let me be clear that we are here today because of that progress."

That progress includes a report showing all 50 states, five tribes and two territories are participating in premises registration, and 300,000 premises are registered. The USDA is also approving private and state animal tracking databases. They have currently evaluated five of approximately 20 applications for animal tracking databases.

"This is an effort that, in a large part and a major part, is driven by the private sector," Johanns said. "The private sector has stepped forward."

Encouraging competition

The private sector is involved because Johanns believes that competition is good for the industry. Our country has a long-standing tradition with competition, and the USDA is eager to approve additional tag options to encourage competition.

"When you put it all together you realize that we have, in fact, made considerable progress," Johanns said. "This progress simply would not have happened without the support of producers, industry, states and other stakeholders."

Johanns said the next step is to double their efforts to take animal ID to the next level. Animal ID is going to remain one of his top priorities, which means moving toward established goals and paying attention to feedback, as well as education.

Confidentiality of the data will be included in the NAIS, Johanns said. Concern about confidentiality was based on the notion that there would be a massive system somewhere, controlled by the USDA, administered entirely by the federal government. Johanns dismissed the notion and told the audience, "The best system is going to be driven at the ground level, by you, by producers and by those who are involved."

Johanns continued, "It's a voluntary system, so it must meet the needs of the producers in order to encourage them to be involved and garner their support. That's the kind of system I fundamentally believe is best for these industries."

Keeping it voluntary

Johanns firmly believes that the best approach will be a voluntary system and that

this system should be driven by the private sector. He believes that the best participation, the best price competition and the best opportunity for producers is the voluntary system.

The USDA plans on issuing a comprehensive document in the next few months to further explain NAIS and help answer questions. It is also conducting a grassroots outreach campaign to address questions, correct misinformation, and make sure producers understand the value of animal ID.

"At its core, the system is a critical tool in safeguarding agriculture animals from disease," Johanns said. "When it comes to an outbreak, time is money. It's absolutely important that we come to grips with how we move this forward. This ID system will enable health officials to stop the spread of disease."

"I pray that disease outbreak never arrives and that we never have to put that system in place," he continued. "If it does, we'll be glad that we fought this battle and that we did everything we can do to put this system in place."

That being said, one may wonder what the risk of an animal disease emergency is. Scott Stuart, NIAA chairman, said, "It's like predicting hurricanes, earthquakes and other calamities. It isn't a question of *if* but, rather, *when*."

Stuart said NAIS is something we must have. He said everyone must continue to work on this issue with a sense of purpose and an attitude of compromise in order to make it as effective and nonintrusive as possible.

Meeting goals

Audience members asked questions about what would happen if the program is not in place by 2009, which was the goal set by the USDA. Johanns commented that they set goals as benchmarks, not mandatory deadlines. If the goal is missed by a month or two, it's not the end of the world. They set goals to measure progress.

"Our goal is 48-hour traceability," said John Clifford, deputy administrator of veterinary services for USDA's APHIS. "It's critically important that we do things right."

Johanns ended his speech stating that the NAIS is not just important — it's absolutely necessary. "But to achieve this with so much at stake, we must have everyone on board."

