Sun Sets on a U.S. National Animal ID System

As 50 states form ID plans, animal health professionals ask, "What's Next?"

Story & photos by **Boyd Kidwell**

After spending six years and $120 million trying to convince livestock producers that a National Animal Identification System (NAIS) is a top priority, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently scrapped the effort and turned responsibility for livestock identification (ID) over to the 50 states and various tribal nations. Under the new framework, USDA requires ID only in interstate movement of livestock and each state decides what form of ID is required.

Many ranchers and cattle producers greeted the demise of NAIS with the satisfaction of watching a government program nipped in the bud. On the other hand, many animal health advocates (including the nation's largest veterinary association) see the end of efforts toward a national computer-based ID tracking program as a step backward to a patchwork

► Animal health professionals say a patchwork of 50 state animal ID plans may not protect the U.S. beef industry in an emergency situation.

system of clipboards and paper trails created by 50 states.

As a state veterinarian says, "Ending a national computer-based program is like throwing away your laptop and going back to legal pads and pencils. You can track animals through a paper trail, but that wastes valuable time during an emergency."

Finally, there's the question of U.S. credibility for food safety in a world that demands animal traceability. Since other major beef exporting nations have national traceability systems, economists say it may be increasingly difficult for U.S. beef producers to regain the exports lost during an isolated case of BSE dubbed the "Christmas Cow" episode of 2003-2004. Economists estimate that the loss of exports and lower domestic prices blamed on the "Christmas Cow" cost the U.S. beef industry approximately $4 billion in 2004 alone.

Ranchers celebrate

Donley Darnell of Newcastle, Wyo., is happy to see NAIS scrapped, but the third-generation rancher isn't sure the idea of a national ID system for livestock is totally dead.

The big, 'What if?'

When it comes to traceability, foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) is a serious challenge looming on the horizon. FMD is so highly contagious that all cattle, pigs and horses in the vicinity of an infected animal are exposed.

In 2001, an FMD outbreak in Great Britain destroyed 6 million animals and cost $12 billion. In a simulated outbreak of the disease during a 2002 exercise (Crimson Sky) fictional cattle infected with FMD were traced from a sale barn in Texas through typical transportation channels to feedlots and ranches in other states.

In the first day after the sale, livestock in five states would have been infected. Livestock in 35 states would have been infected 10 days after the sale. In less than a month, the Crimson Sky exercise indicated there would be 48.5 million infected animals in 641,000 herds across 44 states.

The potential for this kind of disaster has many veterinarians and some beef producers wondering if a system based on a paper trail managed by 50 states and tribal nations can quickly trace animals in the event of an emergency.

The United States had its last FMD outbreak in 1929. Japan is presently battling its first FMD outbreak since 2000 and South Korea is destroying livestock to control an FMD outbreak. Some cattle groups are fighting a proposed trade agreement that would allow imports of beef products into the U.S. from Brazil, a country with FMD in certain areas.

"We felt the whole time that NAIS was inappropriate, and the program didn't address all of the problems we have with diseases in livestock. We really don't need another layer of government bureaucracy in the cattle business," Darnell says.

Donley and his wife, Nancy, are partners in D&W Livestock, a family ranching operation in northeast Wyoming that has 1,500 commercial cows. Darnell is a member of the Powder River Basin Resource Council and the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC.) Both of these organizations are solidly against the NAIS.

Gilles Stockton, a rancher from Grass Range, Mont., represented WORC in a conference call with Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack when the decision to drop NAIS was announced.

"My fellow members of WORC and I are pleased with Secretary Vilsack's decision to scrap the proposed NAIS. Livestock producers across the nation recognized that this proposal was intrusive, expensive and unworkable. We told this to Secretary Vilsack in as clear terms as possible," says Stockton, who runs a commercial Angus beef herd.

The Montana rancher urges USDA to remember as it plans future animal health programs that its first responsibility is to prevent the importation of livestock diseases, and its second responsibility is to prevent the spread of diseases already introduced.

"I believe that livestock producers will support measures to mitigate the transmission of diseases as long as those measures designed to meet these responsibilities are practical and build on current state and federal disease control measures," Stockton says.

Opposition isn't confined to western ranchers. Ron Freeman of Jacksonville, Ill., has been against NAIS for years.

"This government program was designed and built to put the cart before the horse. There was never a cost analysis to see what NAIS would cost producers and there was nothing in the program to eradicate diseases. This was simply an economic incentive for companies that provided the infrastructure for animal ID," says Freeman, a partner in Freeman Bros. Ranching.

Freeman maintains that the cost to equip cattle with electronic (eID) ear tags and store the information would be at least $25 per head. In addition to the price of eID tags, Freeman includes associated costs for labor, handling facilities and recordkeeping.

The cow-calf producer maintains that older USDA disease eradication programs (brucellosis and tuberculosis) provide paper trails that trace animals in case of emergencies.

Paper trail nightmare?

The idea of 50 states and various tribal nations creating numerous forms of animal ID plans and then tracing animals around the country during an emergency is enough to give animal health professionals some sleepless nights.

As a former USDA veterinarian and director of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), veterinarian Ron DeHaven helped develop NAIS. DeHaven is now CEO of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA.)

"The AVMA and I (personally) believe we need mandatory NAIS to effectively and promptly trace large numbers of animals individually across state lines during a large disease outbreak," DeHaven says.

The veterinarian agrees that animals can be traced by paper trails, but a national electronic-computer system would be much quicker. In an emergency, such as a foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) outbreak, rapid identification and trace-back of exposed animals will decrease economic impacts on producers and reduce animal suffering by holding disease exposure to a minimum, DeHaven says.

From a state perspective, veterinarian Tom Ray of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture says that encouraging each state to develop its own animal ID system could turn into a nightmare.

"The mantra from the feds is maximum flexibility for the states. This sounds good, but having 50 different ID systems will be a nightmare," Ray says. "Throwing out a uniform electronic ID system is like throwing out your computers and going back to notebooks and pens. I can identify a truckload of animals with electronic ID tags and BlueTooth (wireless communication) to my laptop computer and generate a spread sheet in a matter of minutes. If we go back to visual ear tags and paper, the same job will take much longer, and there's more chance for human error with paper trails."

U.S. goes against the flow

Most major beef exporting countries have instituted animal ID systems and use animal ID as a demonstration of food safety. By dropping NAIS, the United States may be sending a signal that could adversely affect the industry's international reputation, according to Ted Schroeder, an agricultural economist at Kansas State University.

Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Japan have mandatory individual animal ID systems and traceability requirements. The European Union (EU) has an individual animal ID system, and Uruguay and Brazil have designed individual animal traceability systems to meet EU requirements.

After years of research, study of animal transportation in the United States and trips to Australia, Canada and Brazil in recent years, Schroeder has gained insight into the role of animal ID in world commerce.

"Having a viable national animal identification program is important not only during emergency animal health situations, but also for routine health surveillance as well as food safety enhancement," Schroeder says. "The U.S. prides itself in having a high-quality, safe and healthy livestock herd in general, but we are lax relative to world standards and to our major global competitors in animal ID and traceability systems."

The United States is not compliant with established World Animal Health Organization recommendations relative to animal ID and traceability, points out the veteran livestock economist. In major beef exporting countries (Australia, Canada and New Zealand), the development of advanced traceability programs has come primarily from industry leaders and beef producers more so than from the government.
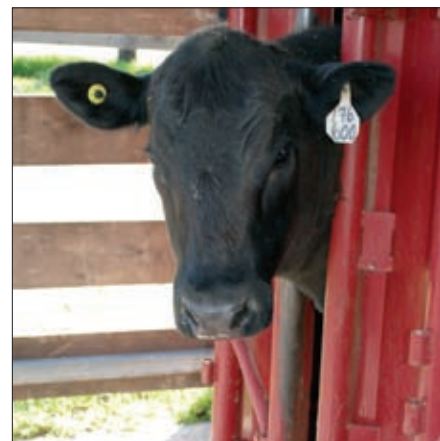
►At one point USDA planned for most cattle to be equipped with electronic ID tags (yellow tag in animal's right ear) and able to be traced by computer records.