

States are crucial part of efforts to keep animal ID plan on track

by Carolyn Orr

Imagine being able to identify every location a horse has been its entire life, from birth to death. If U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns has his way, this will be possible not only for horses, but for every chicken, pig, cow and farmed deer in the United States, within 48 hours, using state-developed and -maintained databases.

"We have been working on an animal identification plan here at the USDA over a number of years, and our goal has remained consistent: to be able to track animals within a 48-hour period in the event of a disease outbreak," says Bill Hawks, USDA undersecretary for marketing and regulatory programs. "We are prepared to roll up our sleeves and get this implemented."

The federal government recently announced plans to have a mandatory National Animal Identification System (NAIS) in place by January 2009. Such information systems already are in place in other key international agricultural markets such as Canada, the European Union and Australia.

The move toward a mandatory, national animal ID system in this country has garnered increased attention over the last few years, thanks in large part to concerns about agricultural terrorism and the discovery in Washington state of a dairy cow with bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

"It is very important to maintain consumer confidence in food safety," Iowa Republican Sen. David Johnson of Osceola says. "The NAIS will provide required information to contain and minimize any disease outbreak as well as help officials inform the public."

Some producers and state officials, though, have expressed reservations about the plan, particularly regarding such issues as funding, confidentiality and increased federal involvement in the agricultural industry. Below is a look at some of the plans and key issues related to implementation of the animal ID system.

States' role and concerns

Next steps — Much of the responsibility for the ultimate success of NAIS remains at the state level. According to a May 2005 USDA proposal, states will be required to oversee three fundamental steps in this process. The first is premise registration: assigning a unique identification number to every location that may hold animals. All states are expected to be participating in premise registration by July. Next, individual identification numbers for some animals (cattle, horses, etc.) and group identification numbers for others (swine, poultry, etc.) must be developed by April 2008.

A look at animal ID

This is the first in a two-part series examining plans to implement a mandatory National Animal Identification System. The second part will appear in the August edition of *Stateline Midwest*. It will focus on the confidentiality concerns that some producers and policymakers have regarding an animal ID system.

"Every animal will have an individual identification number, just like Social Security numbers," Hawks says.

Under the current proposal, by January 2009, the reporting of any change of ownership, death or change of premises that involves animals commingling will be mandatory. As animals move from one location to another, individual identification or group numbers, premise numbers and the dates involved will be reported to a national records repository. States are developing their own identification systems, but all are required to be compatible with NAIS. Forty-five states have thus far enacted legislation to facilitate participation in the national system.

In 2004, the USDA provided \$11.6 million in grants to 29 state or regional pilot cattle identification programs. Midwestern states received approximately 24 percent of this funding. Kansas' \$800,000 project is one of the most intensive; it combines global positioning, cellular and radio frequency technologies to track cattle in transit.

Wisconsin, a pioneer of the national animal identification system, already has 10,000 livestock premises registered, 15 percent of the national total. The state has advanced more quickly than others in large part because of lawmakers' passage of the Wisconsin Premise Registration Act, which mandates that all facilities participate by November 2005. The Wisconsin system has been offered as the model premise registration system for states.

The state also includes the broadest range of species, going beyond cattle, sheep and hogs to include fish, llamas, deer, horses, poultry, pheasants, ostriches and the cousins of all these species that might be farmed in the state. The USDA program has focused on cattle, but eventually will include all of these species.

Premise Identification — States are determining their own way to identify premises — a process that is not as straightforward as it might seem. According to Illinois Rep. Dan Reitz, a Democrat from Sparta, his state's program defines premise "as an identifiable physical location using latitude and longitude or sections." But

this can get confusing when two different pastures are in the same section or when facilities may be rented to different producers.

Indiana Republican Sen. Robert Jackman of Milroy, a veterinarian, reports that "in addition to farms, premises also include veterinary clinics, show grounds and processing facilities."

"In short, any place that has the ability to handle livestock [is involved]," he says. "Each state will be required to provide a number to these locations and maintain information on ownership, contact information, business functions and the kinds of animals that may commingle there."

Animal Identification — Radio frequency identification devices (RFID), which several countries already use, are the leading choice in individual animal tracking technologies. These tiny, wireless electronic tags are similar to those required by some retail stores on their products.

Certain producers, though, prefer to use retinal scans, because the animal's eye scan is more permanent than an ear tag. Most horse owners are expected to use implanted microchips.

Ear tags and retinal scans only work up through slaughter. As a result, DNA analysis is the choice of some operators because it can be tracked all the way to the consumer. The USDA has taken a "technology-neutral" stance, which could result in any of these methods being accepted in different states and make the tracking of animals across state lines more difficult.

Funding — Naturally, there are costs associated with the national animal ID project. Both public and private funding will be required. The federal government is providing the standards and the databases. It will be up to state and tribal governments to register premises and provide the administration and tracking systems that feed into the databases.

Producers will have to identify their animals and maintain records for the databases. Marketers, processors, boarding facilities and others will be required to maintain and supply animal location records.

Depending on the species, identification alone could add several dollars to the cost of producing an animal. State costs to maintain the information are an additional expense. In fact, Iowa was one of the few remaining states to adopt a system for registering livestock premises because it was waiting for federal funds. However, Robert Fourdraine, chief operating officer of the Wisconsin program, says these expenses should be put into perspective.

"The cost of putting a system together will be far outweighed by the costs involved if a disease outbreak or terrorist attack happens," he says.

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Animal species that could directly or indirectly impact the nation's food supply would be tracked under a mandatory system being developed by states and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. (photo: USDA)