

# Identifying a Need

*Midwestern legislators examine the future of animal ID in the United States and Canada*

By Tim Anderson

Nearly a year after a Holstein cow in Washington tested positive for mad cow disease, South Dakota Sen. H. Paul Dennert still thinks about two of the troubling questions he began asking himself and others soon after the incident.

What if the animal could not have been traced back to a farm in Canada? And just how devastating then would the discovery have been for cattle producers?

“I ask those questions to my constituents all the time,” he said. “They’re tough questions to think about. But I do know they spurred me into thinking that we need to identify our animals in this country.”

The December 2003 incident also ultimately led Dennert to help organize a special meeting of the Midwestern Legislative Conference. This summer, he and fellow members of the MLC’s Midwest-Canada Relations Committee sponsored a session on livestock identification programs. It was held in conjunction with the MLC Annual Meeting in Des Moines, Iowa.



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The session allowed lawmakers from both sides of the border to learn more about the U.S. voluntary animal ID system and Canada’s experience with a mandatory program. The committee also focused on making sure the two countries work collaboratively on the issue.

“We have to do this together; it [the identification system] has to be North American,” Dennert said.

## **Time for Action**

Last year’s BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) case in Washington is one of several reasons that animal ID has become a more pressing priority for U.S. policy-makers. The ensuing closure of markets to U.S. cattle exports served as a reminder about the need to keep overseas customers confident in the country’s beef supply.



Even before the discovery, recent cases of animal disease around the world illustrated just how devastating outbreaks can be. In the United Kingdom alone, mad cow disease and foot and mouth disease have cost producers billions of dollars within the past five years.

“Foreign animal diseases cause tremendous economic and social hardships, and they’re always knocking at our door,” John Wiemers, coordinator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Animal Identification Plan, said at the MLC meeting.

He believes the nation’s current system of identifying animals is not adequate.

“We can track animals today; it just takes a while,” Wiemers said. “But in the event of a foreign animal disease outbreak, we can’t wait weeks or months for the system to work, because millions and millions of dollars in trade will be lost every day. We need to be able to respond quickly.”

Rallying support for a national ID system, though, has not been easy.

“The concern comes when people start thinking it will be mandated by the government,” said Dennert.

The national program is voluntary for just that reason, according to Wiemers. He envisions a day when producers are “100 percent compliant” with a national animal ID system that simply is viewed “as business as usual.”

For now, though, the system remains a work in progress.

“We’re as close as we’ve ever been to finding a consensus on what we need to do,” Wiemers told the MLC. “Talking to people about what we’re doing tends to alleviate their fears and concerns.”

The USDA’s stated goal is to eventually have a national program in place that allows for “the tracing of all animals and premises potentially exposed to a foreign animal disease within 48 hours.”

This year, the agency allocated \$18.8 million to launch a national ID program. Most of that money is being sent to states and tribal governments, which, in turn, will develop their own

animal premises registration system. (Earlier this month, several Midwestern states were awarded grants to move ahead with their plans.)

The USDA has given states the responsibility of registering premises, but the system also must be standardized so it can be used in conjunction with programs around the country.

“By having a location-based system, we can create, from day one, maps that quickly show where the infection is, what other farms are involved, and how many resources it is going to take to control the outbreak,” Wiemers said.

Wisconsin’s existing Livestock Identification Consortium will be used as a model for other states implementing the premises registration. Meanwhile, the USDA will work on implementing other components of the national system, most notably a process to identify livestock and track the movement of each animal.

“We anticipate that it will be a few years before it is up and running,” Wiemers said.

### Ahead of the Curve

Like the United States, Canada has many compelling reasons for wanting a national ID system that protects animal health and agricultural foreign markets. The two countries are the world’s second and third largest exporters of beef and cattle (behind Australia).

Perhaps because its livestock industry relies more on exports, Canada has been ahead of the United States in implementing an identification system.

Since July 1, 2002, the federal government has mandated participation in a cattle ID program. The system is operated and funded by the private livestock industry.

“In my mind, that is the beauty of the system,” said Brad Wildeman, president of the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency, during a presentation to the MLC. “Because it is owned and controlled by producers, we also can control where we take this model in the future.”

The government’s only real role now is to enforce the mandate. For example, it can issue fines if animals have not been tagged at auctions or slaughterhouses.

According to Wildeman, compliance with the livestock identification system is nearly 100 percent. He added that the few cases of noncompliance have had more to do with technological problems that will be fixed when the system moves to the exclusive use of radio frequency animal ID tags (as opposed to bar codes).

Funding for the CCIA comes from a 20-cent surcharge on the tags that producers must purchase for their animals. When an animal leaves its herd of origin, a producer must apply the tag so the animal can be tracked.

“In order to make this work, we knew we had to make it simple for producers to use, and we did that,” Wildeman said.

The CCIA now plans to expand the animal ID program to other species. It also hopes to work closely with U.S. policy-makers.

“Our two countries’ systems will need to work seamlessly, because animal disease doesn’t respect political boundaries,” he said.

—Tim Anderson is publications manager of the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments.