

ANIMAL IDENTIFICATION IN 2004

About a year ago this column was devoted to a discussion of mandatory cattle identification programs and some of the serious questions the beef industry would have to address regarding this issue. In December of 2003 the first case of BSE in the U.S. was detected in a dairy cow imported from Canada into Washington and the time frame for a U.S. animal ID system was immediately moved up. This month's column will be devoted to examining what an ID program looks like in a foreign country that has been working on this issue for over 25 years.

The example we will discuss is the French cattle identification system. France is an important example because they have the largest cattle herd in continental Europe and they are the largest beef exporter in the European Union. France is about 1.3 times the size of California. France has a human population of 60 million and California has less than 36 million. France has about 20 million cattle and all the cows and calves in California would number less than 6 million. It is obvious that cattle production in France is a major agricultural concern. The average herd size is about 70 cows and the average farm is about 150 acres or slightly less. Many of the cows are dairy cows or dual purpose cattle (milk cows that are later slaughtered for beef). They also have large numbers of beef cattle such as Charolais, Simmental, Maine-Anjou, etc. The French started their animal identification program in 1978 with the introduction of permanent individual animal identification. They have refined and revised their program many times over the past 27 years, including the creation of a national data base for cattle identification data in 1999.

How does the ID system work in France?

When a calf is born the owner registers the birth of the animal and submits a request for that animal's individual identification. This submission goes to Department authorities. A Department in France is equivalent to a county in the U.S. Each Department coordinates with the national identification system to process each registration and request. The owner can submit this information by mail, fax, or email. The owner then receives in the mail the animal's passport with all required information and two ear tags for application on the calf. This process is usually accomplished within 7 days. The passport is the animal's permanent documentation and must be retained at all times by the owner and must accompany the animal during any and all movements or changes in ownership. The two ear tags are applied to the calf as soon as practical. Both ear tags are identical and contain the country code (FR), the department number (for example 71), an eight digit unique number with the last 4 digits being the animal's working number for day-to-day herd use. Additionally, there is a bar code on the tag that is unique for all this information. For example, the two tags might have FR (country code) 71 (the Department code) 1256 7891 (the last 4 digits being the working number),

and the bar code for all this information. If one or both ear tags are lost, the owner must reapply for new eartags and updated passport documentation in a manner similar to the application when the calf was born.

On the front side of the passport will be the animal's unique identification number in addition to the following information: the 4 digit working number, sex, breed, date of birth, place of birth (premise information), cow's identification number, breed of cow, breed of bull, and the animal's health certificate document. The back side of the passport contains the animal's genetic certification data, the passport document number, and 6 places to record a change in location or ownership. Each of these change of location/ownership blanks contain the animal's identification number, a unique premise identification description and number, a date of arrival, a date of departure, and a signature line. Whenever an animal is sold or moved this information must be supplied on the passport and this must be accompanied by a valid signature. If an animal dies for any reason, a veterinarian must document that occurrence on the animal's passport and submit that information to the animal health authorities. In essence, each animal that dies has a death certificate issued via the completion of the passport and health certificate document.

What happens when an animal is slaughtered?

In France, most of the 3 million-plus cattle that are slaughtered each year for beef are more than 24 months of age. These animals are tested for BSE and the animal identification documents are essential for this surveillance process to occur. When any animal is taken to the slaughter facility it must have both ear tags in place (the tags must be identical to each other) and the animal must be accompanied by its original passport. The passport and the ear tags must match and additional bar coded documents are prepared the day prior to slaughter. These bar coded documents are based on the passport/ear tag information and will accompany the various parts of the animal (head, heart, tongue, carcass, offal, etc) through the slaughter and packing house process. If an animal is brought to the slaughter house without proper documentation the owner will be fined about \$300, the animal will be euthanized, and will be sent to a rendering plant and reduced to meat and bone meal which is then incinerated.

What does this system cost in France?

The cost of the French animal identification system is shared between the farmer and the government. The producer pays 3 Euros (about \$3.60) per animal per year and keeps all the necessary records and documentation related to the individual animal identification. The government supplies the ear tags and the passports, maintains the data base, and provides veterinary services for documenting animal deaths and other activities related to animal identification. These costs amount to about 10% of France's animal health and welfare budget and are about \$160 million per year. This for a country about 1.3 times the size of California. Also for comparison purposes, France has about 4,600 veterinarians working full time or part time for national animal health and welfare programs. In California there are only about 500 veterinarians registered to use the

Brucellosis vaccine. Therefore, that number plus the CDFA and USDA veterinarians would be only a fraction of what another developed society has in terms of professional resources. Obviously, the French model which was developed over a 25+ year period and well supported by the taxpayer will not be immediately applicable to the U.S.

Where do we go from here?

We have a number of problems that need to be solved with any animal identification system we initiate. We have to be effective in terms of ownership issues. We have cattle industries that are different in the western U.S. versus east of the Rockies. In the West we need brand laws or similar mechanisms to determine ownership, in the East brands are not even a consideration. The need for production records and individual animal identification will increase, not diminish. The need for trace back for disease outbreaks will continue with us for the foreseeable future. Also, our trading partners, whether foreign or domestic will continue to be interested in source verification. We will need cattle identification systems.

Now, we have to consider some tough questions. Who will pay for the programs? Who do the programs benefit and who has the most to lose? If the identification system costs are born entirely by the producers, it is my opinion the beef industry will be bankrupted. The already subsidized dairy industry will also be negatively impacted but not crippled. Who will maintain the data bases and ownership information? Our FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) laws do not exist in France, so they do not see this as an issue. This is a make-or-break issue for the litigious U.S. system. What is the potential liability for the producer that first places the identification on the animal? These are the same conceptual concerns as for the FOIA issues. Hopefully, our program will evolve with input from the grass roots segments of the various industries as well as the regulatory communities. I would urge you to stay involved at the local level and with state and national organizations to be sure that U.S. and state regulations make sense for you and all beef producers.

John Maas, DVM, MS
Diplomate, ACVN & ACVIM
Extension Veterinarian
School of Veterinary Medicine
University of California, Davis