

Animal Identification: Where are we now?

Three years ago I wrote in this column about the proposed National Animal Identification System (NAIS) and many of the potential questions we had at that time. I thought this might be an opportune time to revisit this issue and review some of the questions to see if we have come up with any answers. Also, there is developing technology that may help solve of the problems that have been identified and we can discuss its potential.

Who pays for the program?

This was the first question we posed three years ago and we still do not have a complete or clear answer at this time. It is obvious; however, that the initial cost of putting an electronic ID tag in calves as they leave the herd of origin will be borne by the cow/calf producer. The good news is that the cost of these tags has dropped appreciably in the last three years. In some herds the tag will be placed in the calf soon after birth and in other herds the tag will be put in at the sales yard soon after the animal leaves the herd of origin. Both extremes will be possible under the NAIS and with both the animal's ID will be linked to the herd of origin (premise number of herd of origin).

Who will keep track of the cattle movements and what will this cost?

The answers to these questions are less clear. At the moment, the animal tracking (recording animal movements from one premise to another) part of the NAIS is not well defined. It is quite possible this function of the NAIS will be managed by the private sector and therefore, the various sectors of the industry may bare the up front costs. Cost-sharing with the USDA may occur as the various regulatory agencies (USDA and state animal health officials) need to access the private data base(s) to track animal movements for animal disease control purposes.

Who will have access to the cattle tracking databases?

The cattle industry and other animal production groups have made it very clear that only legitimate animal health officials (USDA and state animal health officials) should have access to these databases. It has become obvious that Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) laws are not compatible with these types of databases. While many solutions to this conundrum have been discussed, none have been finalized. At present it appears that these animal tracking databases will be secured for legitimate use only by animal health officials.

What have we learned from the pilot projects?

Many projected have been started or completed around the U.S. to answer the question, "How will this NAIS ID system really work?" Two things have become clear from the results of these pilot projects, (1) putting an electronic ID ear tag in cattle as they leave the herd of origin is relatively simple, (2) tracking all the movements of these

animals through our system of commerce to the slaughter house (or death) is going to be a challenge.

Is there newer technology that might help?

One piece of technology caught my eye the other day and may be of tremendous value. A company called API is marketing an electronic (EID) tag that meets all the NAIS specifications and data can be “written” on the tag. Other EID tags can only be read (the 15 digit ID number is read electronically). These WriteTAGs™ can store data on the source (premise ID for herd of origin), age (date of birth), treatment, and visual ID number. The ability to record more data on these tags is already present. These WriteTAGs™ can be read or written to by a fairly inexpensive, hand-held device. With this type of technology it is possible for cattle to carry all their individual movement data in these tags. Therefore, large portions of the expensive data bases needed for tracking cattle currently may not be necessary for the NAIS to operate.

What should I do?

At this point I would encourage everyone to register their premises and obtain a premise ID number. This can be done easily and at no cost through the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA). You can obtain your premise ID on line at <http://www.californiaid.org>. This web site will allow you to obtain your unique premise number. Alternatively, you can call CDFA at (866) 325-5681 and speak with CDFA personnel directly. Additionally, you should begin to think about EID tags and how they could be implemented in your operation. The NAIS program may become mandatory by 2009, only 2.5 years from now.

Where can I learn more?

Your county livestock advisor has a wealth of information about this topic. The UC Cooperative Extension system in cooperation with CDFA has generated information on premise ID, how ID technology works, the potential value of electronic record keeping, and emerging ID technologies. A number of county-based educational programs have been conducted in California and your advisor can tell you where the next meetings will be held. Additionally, there is a large amount of printed material on animal ID available from your livestock advisor. It is important to remember that the NAIS is only for animal disease control purposes. Animal ID for source verification, age verification, marketing alliances, country or origin labeling, and other purposes is not necessarily part of this program and will not become mandatory. Animal ID for those purposes will be strictly voluntary but could be an added value to the NAIS.

John Maas, D.V.M., M.S.
Diplomate, ACVN & ACVIM
Extension Veterinarian
School of Veterinary Medicine
University of California, Davis