

USDA-APHIS encourages signing up for voluntary NAIS

By MJ Gilsdorf, NAFV EVP

In a letter to the editor (included below), Bruce Knight, Undersecretary, USDA, APHIS, Marketing and Regulatory Programs, explains the importance of a national animal identification system. There has been a lot of confusion and anxiety created over the concept of a national animal identification system in the past several years. However, what is being proposed, in my opinion, is an improved approach that attempts to better coordinate the multiple animal identification systems that are in use today. We have had several national animal identification systems in place for more than 50 years for each of our national animal disease programs, including tuberculosis, brucellosis, scrapie, pseudorabies, hog cholera, and avian influenza. The information being collected is usually composed of the name, address, premises, and individual animal identification, so that the animal can be traced if a disease traceback is needed. Many farmers I have talked with are afraid the new system will be used by other government agencies for tax assessments or by animal rights groups. They want assurance that this information will be confidential. However, USDA has been using this type of information in their disease eradication programs for the past 50 years or more, without a problem of keeping the information confidential.

After working for USDA for 33 years in animal disease eradication programs and working with animal identification systems, I don't see this effort as anything more than the systems currently in place, with one exception. The system that is being proposed is more centralized and coordinated than before. Since it has taken an extended amount of time to get the new system in place, many of the States have started their own animal

identification systems that are compatible with a national system. These systems include premises registration and individual animal identification devices. Several States are also making portions of their state animal identification system mandatory, because they don't think they will be able to effectively trace animals within a short period of time if the system is voluntary.

Government agencies are not the only groups pushing for a national animal identification system. The pork producers are developing their own system, which is also compatible with the national system being proposed. We will have more information on that in the near future. Please see Bruce Knight's letter below: (Comments are welcome)

As last year's outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) in the United Kingdom once again demonstrated, foreign animal disease outbreaks do have costly affects on producers' livelihoods, consumer confidence and a country's ability to keep markets open. The capability to respond quickly and effectively to an animal disease event is of utmost importance to stop the spread of the disease.

Animal health officials need to know the animals involved, where they are located, where they have been, and any other animals that may have been exposed to the disease. The sooner such reliable data is available, the sooner affected animals can be located, appropriate response measures can be taken, and disease spread can be halted. The United States has such a system - the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) - but we need the support of the animal agriculture industry to successfully implement it. NAIS is a voluntary partnership between producers and their government.

An outbreak of a disease like FMD

in the United States would immediately disrupt production, require the quarantine and destruction of unprecedented numbers of livestock herds, and suspend industry's access to world markets. It would financially cripple America's animal agriculture economy. The good news is that having the ability to rapidly trace the movement of infected or exposed animals through NAIS would help limit all of these devastating impacts. America needs the protection a successful national animal identification system would provide.

There's no question that traceability is the key to protecting animal health and marketability in this country if a disease like FMD entered the country. We also need to ensure that we are able to respond quickly to outbreaks of other animal diseases like bovine tuberculosis. Retrieving animal location and movement data within 48 hours is the long-term goal of NAIS. This quick response is optimal for efficient and effective disease containment and helps to lessen disease spread, as well as reassure our trading partners and the public that our production system - already the finest in the world - is protected in every possible way. Without NAIS, animal health officials investigating a disease outbreak must often use sales receipts, telephone calls and human memory to trace animal movements. It's a slow process, and in the rapid-paced, technology-centric 21st century, it isn't good enough. In contrast, NAIS provides several solutions that would prevent such scenarios in the future. It provides standards for the collection and management of electronic animal identification and movement records, improving the accuracy and thoroughness of available records and searchable databases. NAIS would also greatly reduce the time and costs associated with animal disease response overall.