



Big Brother is Watching your Cows, Sheep, Llamas, Bison, Horses...

The USDA web site insists that its National Animal Identification System (NAIS) is completely voluntary and the USDA has no desire to get rid of small scale producers or grandma's backyard chicken flock. But read a little deeper into the plan for the NAIS.

At present compliance with the NAIS premises and animal registration is voluntary. The USDA is pretty clear, however, that if animal producers (even Grandma and her backyard flock) don't voluntarily comply with the national system of numbering every farm and all of their animals, the USDA will develop a regulatory system (i.e., fines and confiscation of animals) to ensure 100% compliance by January 2008.

Under the plans being outlined by the USDA, every "premises" where animals are raised will have to be registered and will be given a 7-digit premises identification number. Additionally, every single horse, cow, sheep, goat, pig, chicken, duck, guinea fowl, horse, mule, bison, llama will have to have an individual 15 digit animal identification number. Along with the numbers will come requirements to report animal births and deaths to a centralized database. Any time an animal leaves the premises, the movement will be required to be reported. If you take an animal to the vet, to a slaughter plant (unless it is a custom facility and is for your own use), to a show, or anywhere any commingling of animals occurs, that movement will also have to be reported. Interestingly enough, animals, such as hogs or chickens that are raised in a group and marketed as a group only will be required to be identified by a premises number, not an individual animal ID.

The NAIS is the brainchild of the National Institute of Animal Agriculture, whose members include Monsanto and Cargill as well as numerous tag and veteri-

nary supply companies. That in itself should raise the concern of family farmers.

The USDA says that the purpose of the NAIS is to ensure national herd health. The stated intent is to give the animal health people the ability to trace outbreaks of disease within 48 hours. Although the news media touts animal identification as a means to ensure food safety, the USDA maintains it is not about keeping food safe, but only an effort to maintain animal health.

There seems to be some serious problems with the whole idea.

First of all, outbreaks of food borne illnesses can often be tracked quite rapidly with current safeguards in the food safety system, unless, of course, meat has already been mixed in million pound batches. This system of identifying animals will not solve the problems caused by processing meat at the scale of our current system.

Being able to trace the movements of animals and what animals a cow with "mad cow disease" has come in contact with will not prevent this particular disease from spreading as it is not spread animal to animal—unless they are eating each other, which is supposedly now illegal. How will each animal in the U.S. having a tag or a tattoo with 22 numbers in their ears prevent spreading of disease? Animals will still be moved around and rubbing noses. An ear tag never kept an animal from getting sick. Numbers on small scale producers' sow's ears won't keep terrorists from attacking our food system. The whole system is a reactive one, not a proactive one. It will not prevent any of the problems feared. NAIS will only provide a means to shift responsibility for disease outbreaks to the producer.

Who will have access to the data base containing the premises and animal ID information? The USDA promises to keep

this data secure. However, the most common use of radio frequency identification devices (RFIDs) is in inventory control and supply management. Won't the temptation be just too much for major meat packers? Think of the market control possible if a packer has access to exactly how many 1500 lb steers there are in the country at any moment? Is this really about disease control or is it about supply management?

The cost and complexity of the NAIS is being grossly underestimated. There are at least 112 million cattle, 6 million sheep and 9 million horses in the US. A substantial number of those are born, die or are slaughtered every year. Those born will need a new number, at least one entry in the database and a new ear tag. Those that are sold, run away, are eaten by coyotes, die or are slaughtered will require at least another database entry. It seems like it might be a pretty big growth industry just keeping track of all those numbers, births, deaths, trips to the vet, etc. And think of how many special tags will have to be manufactured!

Check out www.stopanimalid.org. Read about the proposed plan on USDA's web site at www.usda.gov. Read the Winter 2006 *Small Farmers' Journal*. Talk to your meat customers. Let them know that an ear tag is no substitute for knowing where your food comes from. Contact your congressmen, state representatives, the state veterinarian. Tell them that you oppose the National Animal Identification System.

The target date for USDA to issue a proposed rule setting forth the requirements for NAIS premises registration, animal identification, and animal tracking was originally set for July, 2006. A limited public comment period will follow publication of the rule. Keep your eyes and ears open for that comment period and be ready to make your voice heard. 🐾