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Export-fueled national animal ID program raises many farmer objections

Costly “mark for the beast” idea fails to address livestock health or meat contamination while adding crushing burdens and risks, campaigning opponents maintain.

By Maggie Fry-Manross



Photos courtesy of Walter Jeffries

With scrutiny from foreign importers, USDA says “nobody can afford to be left behind.”

In a March 30 press release, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association reported on a speech by USDA Secretary Johanns to 400 cattlemen gathered in Washington, D.C., for the NCBA's spring legislative conference.

The story said Johanns “... emphasized that today the system remains voluntary, and he shares NCBA's desire to achieve participation voluntarily, rather than by government mandate. NCBA policy calls for voluntary, market-driven participation by producers in an industry-led animal movement database that protects their confidential information.

“Our hope, which I think is the same as yours, is to bring the system along and hit the benchmarks on a voluntary basis,” Johanns said. “But I just think it's going to be absolutely necessary. Because of the retail market and foreign competition, nobody can afford to be left behind.”

NAIS misses food safety issues

April 13, 2006: Whether its purpose is to increase meat exports or control disease outbreaks, the proposed National Animal Identification

System is ruffling the feathers of livestock producers, large- and small-scale. NAIS is raising questions among farmers regarding their privacy, its costs, the government's real intent, and -- for small-scale farmers and homesteaders -- their eventual right to raise livestock at all.

The United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS) web site (www.aphis.usda.gov) describes NAIS as a quick way to identify sick or at-risk animals during a disease outbreak. “The goal of the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) is to be able to identify all animals and premises that have had contact with a foreign or domestic animal disease of concern within 48 hours after discovery. As an information system that provides for rapid tracing of infected and exposed animals during an outbreak situation, the NAIS will help limit the scope of such outbreaks and ensure that they are contained and eradicated as quickly as possible.”

The system has three phases: registration of premises, registration of animals linked to a specific registered place number, then animal tracking. The first phase involves landowners filling out a questionnaire about the location of their land and what type of animals they are raising there. At present, this phase of NAIS is voluntary, but the USDA timeline for the program calls for 100 percent premises registration by the end of 2008.

You start with a number

Each premises will be assigned a unique, seven-character identifying number. The animals raised there will be assigned numbers, as well, although large-scale facilities will be able to use a group identification number for a flock or herd that is acquired as a group instead of having individual numbers for each animal. Small farmers and homesteaders tend to acquire animals at different times and this option will not be available to them.

“It's the same information as is in the phone book,” said Dore Mobley, APHIS public affairs specialist, of the premises sign-up. “At present it's voluntary, but Wisconsin has gone mandatory, Indiana is in the process, and Texas is talking about it.”

"The reality is that virtually all food contamination happens after the farm, when the animals are slaughtered at the processing plant or later. NAIS does nothing for that. The best protections would be for the USDA to do its job of properly inspecting processing plants rather than making up complex and costly new regulations that will be impossible to enforce."

— Walter Jeffries, in a brochure from NoNAIS.org

NAIS resources, pro and con

USDA APHIS web site outlines NAIS proposal
<http://animalid.aphis.usda.gov/naais/index.shtml>

Walter Jeffries' personal site -- extensive NAIS links, websites, blogs, national news items:
www.nonais.org

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National Pork Producers Council (NPPC)
www.nppc.org

Interactive map for state premises ID programs
www.nppc.org/hot_topics/premidstatesites2.html

National Cattlemen's Beef Association
www.beefusa.org

National Institute of Animal Agriculture (NIAA)
 Animal Identification and Information Systems Committee
 Vet & industry groups, Farm Bureau, state agencies, university departments:
<http://animalagriculture.org/aboutNIAA/committees/AIDIS/animalid.asp>

National sustainable ag coalition wants COOL; small farmer relief

Asked for an assessment of sentiment by the many partnering organizations of the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture (www.sustainableagriculture.net), NCSA policy coordinator Pam Browning told NewFarm.org:

"For years, the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture has advocated for the implementation of Country of Origin Labeling (COOL), so that consumers could make meaningful choices in the food that they eat. Though this program

The second phase – apparently already begun – involves tagging animals with a Radio Frequency Identification Device (RFID). "At present, the only species with an approved ID device are cattle and bison," Mobley said. There are working groups in place to recommend ID devices for other species such as sheep, goats, pigs, horses, and poultry. The goal is to have 40 million new animals per year tagged in 2009, the USDA says, with 1 million animals tagged during 2006.

Animal owners will be required to tag every animal that leaves an identified premises. Every time an animal is sent to auction, to the slaughter house, to a fair or taken on a trail ride, the government wants to be informed. Fines of up to \$1,000 per day are built into the proposal for non-compliance. Cost estimates by APHIS run to as much as \$3 for each RFID device and up to \$2,000 for readers. There will be additional costs (read taxes or fees) to administer the program.

Local customers happy without tracking

Texas beef producer Debbie Davis objects to NAIS as an invasion of privacy. Davis is a member of the recently-formed Farm and Ranch Alliance, a non-profit lobbying group founded to oppose NAIS. "I market my product locally," Davis said. "I diligently keep records including approximate calving dates, sires, dams, which pasture they were in at any given time throughout their life, vaccinations, and any medical treatments of every one of my animals. I can source verify for quality control and peace of mind for my customers--with whom I have contact.

"I have no need to export my product and therefore no need for government intervention into my record-keeping," Davis said. "My property is my own, not the business of the prying eyes of Big Brother wanting to know how many animals I own, where they are and how much land I manage. The way I see it, NAIS is money-driven, having little impact on practical control of disease and is an unconstitutional infringement on my privacy."

Mary Zanoni, of Canton, New York, is a founder and executive director of Farm for Life. The group's intent was to help small-scale producers wade through the ever-growing quagmire of government regulations. "Farm for Life was founded ... to produce educational materials for people who want to sell directly to customers from their farm," Zanoni said. "But we haven't gotten to do that yet! About the time we were starting up, NAIS came along and people wanted to hear about that."

Then there's Vermont hog farmer turned NAIS e-activist, Walter Jeffries. He said NAIS began as a plan to increase international meat exports, especially to Japan, which requires that the movements of cattle be physically traceable. The plan's rationale shifted to disease prevention in 2003 when a case of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE or Mad Cow Disease) was found in the U.S.

Animal-ID industry dream

"NAIS was originally motivated by the large cattle producers' and meat exporters' desire to sell to markets like Japan that require traceback," Jeffries said. "The RFID tag and tracking companies drooled at such a large market and backed the plan out of greed. They stand to sell 12 billion tags a year to a mandatory captive market. At a minimum of \$3 each, this represents tens of billions of dollars in annual sales for them."

Jeffries disputes the stated goal of NAIS, which is rapid response to disease outbreaks. "The Ag Department is doing everything but the right thing," Jeffries said. "They claim they need premises ID so that they will know where all the poultry is in the event of Avian Influenza (H5N1) so that they can kill it." According to Jeffries, NAIS would give the USDA the power to destroy any susceptible livestock within 10 kilometers of a disease outbreak.

He stumbled upon NAIS by accident two years ago when he was looking for information on applying for a sustainable ag grant. Appalled by the implications of NAIS for small-scale producers, he began a letter writing campaign, but no one responded. After repeated tries, he launched the website NoNAIS.org in October of 2006.

Jeffries sees clear danger from NAIS, if it works as proposed and if it goes only slightly wrong. "In addition to sheep and poultry we breed pastured pigs. We sell both piglets and full-sized market pigs. If NAIS goes through, we will stop selling piglets because it's too expensive and too

was authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill, corporate agriculture has successfully lobbied to thwart implementation of COOL with regard to meat, fruit and vegetables on the grounds that it would be too costly to implement.

"Now, without supporting COOL, USDA is moving toward mandatory animal ID with agri-business' blessing. There should be no animal ID without COOL.

"What we are hearing from around the country is that the weight of this animal tracking program falls most heavily on small farmers and ranchers because they would be required to ID all of their animals individually, while large farmers and ranchers can use one ID number per animal group.

"And yet, pastured animals raised sustainably without the conditions of confinement present in factory farming are less likely to be susceptible to the diseases that animal ID was designed to track.

"The burden and cost of implementing this program should not fall on small farmers and ranchers.

"Opposition also is unified against privatization of animal ID, with the feeling that this program could easily be exploited for financial gain."

editor's NOTE:

Be alert when using Internet search engines that you are finding the NAIS you want. The acronym can represent the National Association of Independent Schools or, more likely, the NASA Acquisition Internet Service.

much of a risk for us," he explained. "Under the government's NAIS plan, if a piglet left our farm and contracted a disease somewhere else, the government could easily mistakenly trace-back to our farm. They could then come to our farm and kill all of our breeding stock and other animals without testing, a warrant, or any form of legal appeal. This is a violation of our Constitutional rights."



Many farmers worry NAIS will make it harder, if not impossible, to sell breeding stock due to expense and increased risk.

No help against food-borne pathogens

Jeffries and Zanoni point out that food-borne disease poses a much more common and serious threat to the human population that NAIS does not even address. Disease prevention will come from better import controls, more-thorough facilities inspections and incentives for agricultural methods that stress biodiversity and access to natural pasture.

NAIS will be especially costly to small-scale livestock producers, because their profit margins are already small. "NAIS would make it more expensive to raise food for my own family by approximately \$500 per year," Jeffries said. "This amounts to a hidden tax on our food. With NAIS there are annual fees, costs for tags, threats of high fines if we make a mistake, and NAIS is such a complex system that it is guaranteed a lot of people will make innocent mistakes.

"The big factory farms get to use group animal IDs, because they do everything all-in and all-out at the same time, as a flock or herd. "Homesteaders and small farmers have mixed-age animals which means we would be required to tag, record, report and track every single, individual animal. This puts small farms at even more of a disadvantage and favors the big factory farms since they can keep their costs and effort low," Jeffries said.

Zanoni says strict Christian groups which insist on a literal reading of Revelations 13 will refuse to place what they feel could be a "Mark of the Beast" on their animals. A different and significant religious issue is with the use of the technology per se. One Amish spokesman stated publicly at a local NAIS local meeting in Wisconsin that electronic animal identification is forbidden for their use. This could be a problem without some flexibility, which is not currently being considered. "There is no opt out," said APHIS's Mobley. "Animals are to be tagged before leaving the premises. Perhaps the Amish could have an intermediary."

Great for exporters, no benefit for local sales

As a program for large-scale producers interested in export markets, mandatory participation in NAIS may make sense, but it could spell the end for many small producers. "NAIS should be kept as a strictly voluntary program," Jeffries said. "NAIS is not about disease. It is about profits for the big meat-exporting companies and the RFID tag manufacturers. States love it, because once NAIS becomes mandatory, they will charge a \$10 or more premises ID fee per year.

"If you raise your own food, you end up paying a tax to do so," he stated. "This burden will fall most heavily on the rural poor who least can afford to pay it."

NAIS could also do serious damage to the local foods movement that is spreading across the country. Local foods proponents stress buying directly from small producers to save family farms and to provide consumers with fresh, wholesome food that is not trucked thousands of miles.

Tim Bowser is a local foods entrepreneur and former executive director of the FoodRoutes Network (www.foodroutes.org), a group which assists efforts to rebuild local, community-based food systems.

"I believe that the proposed National Animal Identification Program is an absolute joke as a solution to the problem of livestock disease outbreaks and a very significant threat to local food systems," Bowser said. "It will hurt most the very livestock and poultry producers who are the solution to diseases associated with CAFOs [factory farms] – those appropriately scaled producers that serve direct farmer-to-consumer markets, especially organic and pasture-based meat, poultry, and dairy operations."

Big pork, beef cite cost to farmers

Ironically, the solution to the NAIS problem may come from the very people who started it: the large meat producers. During testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Livestock and Horticulture Committee on Agriculture, Joy Phillippi, current president of the National Pork Producers Council, testified that pork producers are willing to go along with NAIS as long as it doesn't involve any increase in costs to the producers. "The pork industry supports an effective swine database, accessible by both federal and state animal health officials, without producers having to pay additional costs over and above that which they already pay today."

drawing courtesy of Holly Jeffries



In an APHIS Fact Sheet titled National Animal Identification System: Goal and Vision, dated January, 2005, APHIS states that, "Both public and private funding will be required for the NAIS to become fully operational." Private funding means out of the producers' pockets, both large and small.

In the cattle camp, [an article by Joe Roybal](#) in the on-line newsletter BEEF reported that beef producers were more concerned about the costs of implementing NAIS than they were about the possible privacy issues. "A mid-October survey of 16,223 readers found 21.2 percent consider data confidentiality their biggest single concern with NAIS," Roybal wrote. "More concerning was the cost and labor requirements of NAIS for producers (48.3 percent). Coming in third was the potential for producer liability under NAIS."

NAIS isn't a done deal yet. On his web site, Jeffries gives detailed instructions for fighting NAIS, including sample letters and contact information for legislators. "The comment periods are still open," Jeffries said. "The USDA needs to know, in no uncertain terms, that people are not going to stand still for this sort of treatment. Big business should not be able to take over every aspect of our lives and profit from everything. Individual independence and freedom are more important to maintaining our national security than profits." **NF**

Maggie Fry-Manross is a free-lance writer and homesteader who lives in northwestern Pennsylvania. Her family raises (as yet unregistered) poultry, goats, hogs and way too many cats.