

Backlash building against animal ID system

By Henry Lamb

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Reaction to the National Animal Identification System is shining a light on a growing problem that independent producers believe is threatening the entire livestock industry. Vertical marketing practices in the meat processing industry, combined with the industry's access to, and influence on, the Department of Agriculture and Congress, has the small producer against the ropes. The NAIS may be the final blow that puts independent ranchers and small farmers down for the count.

The goal of the NAIS is to create a national system that would enable the federal government to trace, within 48 hours, the origin of any animal in the food chain found to be infected, either by disease or by terrorists. To achieve this objective, a massive database has been proposed, that would contain the location of all premises where animals are kept, identification of every individual animal, as well as a method of tracking any movement from the premises location.

Some people fear that a system capable of tracking the movement of every animal in America is a very small step away from applying a similar system to track the movement of every American.

The program has been under development since 2002 by a public/private partnership with the National Institute for Animal Agriculture. NIAA represents the biggest meat producers in the U.S., including Cargill Meat Solutions and the National Pork Producers Council, and the makers of high-tech animal-ID equipment, such as Micro Beef Technologies and Digital Angel.

NAIS is being introduced in phases, voluntary premises registration first, followed by mandatory registration, then animal registration, and finally, animal movement detection by using RFID tags which could eventually be tracked in real-time by a Global Positioning System. Enforcement would include fines of up to \$1,000 per day for non-compliance.

Independent producers and small farmers want nothing to do with this program. They see it as just another intrusion by government that will add unnecessary costs to their operation, while providing government and the processing industry with a wealth of data that neither should possess.

"We already have an animal identification system that has worked for more than a hundred years," says Caren Cowan, Executive Director of the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association. "It's called a Brand Law." Most Western states have some kind of animal identification system, and virtually all stockyards where livestock is sold, have not only identification of the sellers, but also health certificates on each animal sold.

This data, however, is not centralized. Nor should it be, according to Cowan. "If there's going to be a NAIS, our data should stay in New Mexico, and be available to the federal government only in the event of a certified emergency situation," she said.

Voluntary premises registration has been underway in several states, and is already mandatory in Minnesota and Wisconsin. The Texas Animal Health Commission had scheduled a meeting for March 23, at which they planned to set July 1 as the date to make the program mandatory. Reaction by independent producers, however, forced the meeting to be rescheduled to May 4. Opponents are <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/960373929?l=1142090862> circulating a petition in hopes of scuttling the plan. Maine, North Carolina, Texas, Vermont, and Washington are also considering legislation to make the program mandatory.

State Representative Frank Nicely has introduced a bill in the Tennessee legislature to block the expenditure of any state funds to implement the NAIS. But the federal government has appropriated \$60 million as an incentive for states to implement the program.

<http://nonais.org/> Anti-NAIS organizations are popping up across the country and forming coalitions that embrace ranchers, farmers, poultry enthusiasts, and organic gardeners. A Google search on "NAIS opposition" will produce more than a hundred-thousand hits.

Independent producers believe that the NAIS would violate their Fourth Amendment right to be "secure in their person, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures...." The government has no inherent right to demand any information from producers, without "probable cause supported by oath or affirmation," some contend.

There is strong belief among producers that the NAIS has little to do with food safety and much more to do with providing data for agribusiness.

<http://www.eco.freedom.org/el/20060102/edwardhey.shtml> One farmer says "...agribusiness giants will then have access to all of the information on the [NAIS] database. They will have knowledge about all sources and supplies of commodity animals. They will use such information to improve their ongoing practice of captive supply and market price manipulation."

He is convinced that "The USDA has become the conscript of agribusiness. All key positions at the USDA are now held by former agribusiness people, or their minions."

<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/agri/NHammerschmidtbio.htm> Neil Hammerschmidt, coordinator of NAIS, worked for the National Holstein Association for 26 years. He has also served as the U.S. representative on both the Identification Committee of the International Committee on Animal Recording and the ISO Working Group for International Standards for Electronic Identification of Animals.

These giant corporations and trade associations have enormous influence over agricultural policy through political contributions and representation within government agencies. Small independent ranchers and farmers have little more than determination, and the internet, in their arsenal.

Nonetheless, they are waging a fight that the government and agribusiness has already felt.

"The big guys just want a tighter grip on the market; we are fighting for our lives," says

a Colorado rancher. NAIS has been described as a train coming down the track that cannot be derailed. Independent producers are unwilling to accept this assessment. NAIS engineers may be surprised to discover an avalanche on the tracks ahead.

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