

## ***Misinformation Rampant on National Animal ID***

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As kids, most of us played the game of gossip. One person starts a session by whispering a message to the next person in a circle who in turn passes it to the next and so forth. The end result, as reported by the last person in the chain, is almost always very amusing. Rarely has the message been transmitted intact. And there's more message distortion when the noise is high, and the signal weak. The National Animal Identification System (NAIS) is suffering a similar fate. Noisy misinformation and disinformation flowing to the farm and ranch threatens to drown out the signal of why animal identification really is important to the livestock industry. And there are few groups actively communicating the signal.

A quick glance at Google regarding recent news reports about animal identification tells the story. Google shows over 30 major news articles about the NAIS program since the first of April, including a few major wire service articles. The vast majority of these articles are in opposition to the program – many based on serious misconceptions.

Most of these articles were written in response to the 6 April announcement by U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns that USDA has released an implementation plan outlining the timelines and benchmarks for the establishment of the NAIS, along with a plan for the initial integration of private and state animal tracking databases with NAIS.

It's easy to understand why some of these misconceptions have surfaced. The focus of the Johanns' announcement was on the process USDA had followed to reach this announcement rather than the reason such a system is needed and how it will help protect producers of all sizes. Focusing on USDA's process rather than the system rationale is clearly understandable since many USDA staffers and others in the specie associations have been working this issue for nearly a decade. The reasons for the system are so deeply ingrained in their psyche they often assume others are as equally informed and motivated.

Unfortunately, many producers are seeing the NAIS message for the first time and don't truly understand why they are being asked to change the way they operate. They don't understand why NAIS is necessary and are personally starting from square one. Few organizations are communicating this "square one" signal. Not USDA and not some of the key species groups that need to drive the program forward to help protect their producers. The "signal" about this program and its importance is pretty weak and the noise is strong, and getting stronger. Much more education and discussion is going to be required before the majority of livestock producers are ready to trot out and begin tagging animals. At best, many producers quoted in recent press articles see the NAIS as only adding cost and providing no real value. At worst, certain industry stakeholders see a deep conspiracy to eliminate smaller producers and disadvantage the family farmer.

Let's make sure we're all clear about the "signal", the NAIS's main message, the reason why some type of animal identification system is required. The one and only purpose of the NAIS is to provide a trace back system that can identify all animals and premises potentially exposed to an animal that has been shown to have a potentially devastating disease within 48 hours of the disease's discovery. A potentially devastating disease may be devastating from a health perspective (e.g. Bovine Tuberculosis or Avian Influenza), or from a commercial trading perspective (e.g., FMD or BSE). To be devastating, it does not have to have a severe health impact. That's a common misconception. The common element is an economic one -- both have potentially catastrophic economic impacts on all producers, small or large.

The proposed requirements of the NAIS are fairly simple for producers. All premises that house or pasture livestock would be required to register for a USDA premises identification number issued by the appropriate state or tribal animal health authority. This simple unique number would be only associated with contact information to animal health officials to perform their statutory regulatory mission. Animals or groups of animals would be uniquely identified with a 15 digit number. As animals move through commerce, animal movements are associated with the premises through which they move. Animals that don't move off the farm, don't need to be identified. The simple animal ID associated with a premises ID and a time/date stamp becomes a powerful tool in tracing the movement of animals in the event of a disease investigation. Contrast this with the current laborious process of manually pouring through paper records with no animal or location identification system in place. The result is weeks and months of effort and still without the ability to conclusively track the history of a diseased animal and its herdmates. The real result is crippling economic loss due to unchecked spread of disease and/or export market closure. Those results impact every livestock producer, feeder, marketer, and processor in the country – regardless of farm or operation size.

Experience with foot and mouth disease (FMD) which had a crippling economic impact on all British producers taught us that if we can contain an outbreak of any potentially devastating disease within three days, the impacts to ALL producers, whether small or large, can be substantially reduced. The UK was not able to provide this type of containment in the FMD outbreak a few years ago, and the impact crippled their industry. Other examples from around the globe can be cited (the impact of BSE on Canada which was heavily dependent upon beef exports) where everyone was hurt when some devastating disease impacted some part of the livestock industry, and many producers, especially smaller ones, were driven out of the business.

The evidence of strong, negative economic impact upon the livestock industries from disease outbreaks is indisputable. The U.S. has been somewhat lucky in that most producers have been shielded from the adverse impacts of many of these outbreaks by other market forces. Many beef producers, for example, will cite record high prices for their cattle during the first American BSE incidents as an example of why NAIS is not needed. They argue that prices held even though we had BSE cases. What they didn't acknowledge is that these prices were high due to higher demand by the public due to industry sponsored check-off marketing programs, and that the lack of exports was leaving quite a bit of money on the table. Yes, prices for their product were high, but they could have been much higher.

In a very real way, therefore, NAIS and other traceability programs are an insurance policy for producers to reduce potential catastrophic impact on their livelihoods. This is a powerful message, and I find that when I present NAIS in this light, most producers, even those with some serious misgivings, have to grudgingly agree. To keep the clarity of this message, it is incumbent upon policy makers to ensure that the sole purpose of the system is not corrupted. We need to guard against adding to NAIS other program objectives that muddy the water. Each of these "add-ons" will do nothing but confuse what is a pretty straight-forward message – producers need a way to protect their industry from catastrophic, adverse economic impact..

Now let's look at the "noise" that has cropped up since the Secretary's announcement. Here are some of the more typical published comments that are being peddled as fact:

-- The Nashua New Hampshire Telegraph reported, "Putting a collar on Fido is one thing, but putting a 15-digit tattoo or tag on every rabbit, chicken or sheep you want to sell is another. Yet New Hampshire farmers may face that requirement from a federal program aimed at improving food safety. "We're universally against it," said Lucy Nichols, who owns an organic farm in Greenfield, speaking about small-farm operators whom she knows. Nichols said "the cost, the hassle" and "worry about Big Brother" fuel opposition to what is known as the National Animal Identification Program, as does the belief that many problems such as "mad cow disease" are caused by industrial agriculture, rather than the small or niche farms that make up most New Hampshire agriculture."

-- A widely reported press release announced the creation of a broad-based coalition to oppose the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) as it is presently proposed. "We're calling the project The Liberty Ark Coalition," says Karin Bergener, an Ohio attorney who helped form the coalition. "We hope the Liberty Ark will save our animals, and our farms from unnecessary government intrusion."

These two articles are somewhat shy on specifics but long on opinion. Let's look at some of the "noise" that purports to expose the facts about NAIS:

-- As reported by a livestock weekly, a recent bill introduced in the Tennessee state legislature looks to "opt out of the national electronic cattle-tracking system" because the measure's sponsor said that "electronic tracking is too expensive and that tags containing microchips could be manipulated for fraudulent purposes." He instead called for no-tech metal tags that are "cheap and dependable (and) can't be monkeyed with." The reality of NAIS is that it is technology neutral. It does not call for using RFID devices, or any specific tracking technology. It only indicates that some technology must be used that generates unique tracking numbers. Economic signals may drive some species to adopt specific technologies, but USDA's NAIS remains technology neutral.

-- Numerous publications aimed at farmers and ranchers have inaccurately reported that the NAIS will require every chicken to have an RFID device implanted in it at enormous cost and labor to the producer. As noted above, NAIS does not require RFID or any other specific technology. The USDA wants specie groups to recommend what will work best for their species. Also, there is no requirement that all livestock groups are managed individually. Rather, the NAIS allows for the tracking of groups. One tracking number, for example, could be assigned to a flock of birds. The NAIS procedures do say, though, that if a group tracking method is used, and individuals are removed from the group and sent to different locations, that some method needs to be used to track the sub-group. Most groups within the lower value species, though, tend to stay together during their life, and so the need to identify a sub-group would be a low probability event. The predominance of the poultry and swine industries will likely be managed and identified as groups, not individually, as would other species managed as a group.

-- A variation of the rumor that all chicken must be individually tagged that was a report in a recent publication that owners of 30,000 chickens or more only were required to have a single tracking number for all 30,000 chickens but those who owned less than 30,000 chickens were required to individually tag every chicken. Again, this is not true. Any producer of any size can use a single tracking number to tag an entire group. And any producer, regardless of size, needs to provide a tracking number for a sub-group that is divided from the main group.

-- A medically-oriented publication notified their non-agricultural readers that NIAS, "If enacted ... could -- literally -- nearly overnight wipe out most all the small organic farmers. They simply don't have the financial means and resources to secure these high-tech gadgets and implement the required expensive reporting systems." Other ag publications have quoted costs of over \$20 per chicken for RFID tags. Clearly, the costs are no where near \$20 per tagged animal and no one has suggested putting RFID devices on each chicken. Even if RFID were used for tracking, livestock tags along with electronic reporting services to handle the reporting burden are offered in the marketplace for around \$3 to \$5 per tagged animal or tagged group. That fee includes the tag as well as associated data service fees.

Readers of the Food Traceability Report are highly likely to be well informed about the importance of traceability systems, especially systems like the NAIS. As noted above, many producers and other influential stakeholders are not as well informed. The clarion call to each of us is clear. We must all add strength to the NAIS signal and help clear up misconceptions and other "noise" elements when they occur. We must not rely solely upon USDA to carry the main

message about the protective capability of a well implemented NAIS. We must encourage our livestock associations and other agencies to carry the message forward so that the truth is widely disseminated. And we must keep traceability projects like NAIS clearly focused on their original goal of protecting American livestock from catastrophic adverse impact from animal diseases. We must ensure that project creep doesn't endanger the ultimate acceptance of these programs. We must do all of these things because we don't want the noise created by misinformation and the noise created by project scope creep to drown out the original, clear signal. Remember the bottom line message: NAIS provides producers a way to protect their industry from catastrophic, adverse economic impact. That is a message everyone can understand. And given the real threat of dynamic animal disease, the need for such a system is immediate.

Further information can be found at [www.aginfolink.com](http://www.aginfolink.com) or other organizations working to disseminate information about the NAIS including [www.animalagriculture.org](http://www.animalagriculture.org).

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