

National Animal ID – Blessing or Curse?

What follows are some considerations and conclusions that have resulted from discussions within the PASA board of directors regarding the USDA's proposed National Animal Identification System. Since NAIS has proven to be somewhat of a moving target, this does not exactly represent a board "policy" on the matter, rather more a status report on our thinking.

Whatever else is said about the NAIS, it is an enormously complex issue that deserves careful thought. To some, it is seen quite simply as the last nail in the coffin of small and mid-sized livestock farms across America. To others, it is perceived as a necessary step for any farmer to retain the value of his/her years of hard work and careful animal husbandry.

The system is already being implemented in some states, at least to the extent that individual premises identification has been mandated. Such a bill is also pending in the Pennsylvania Senate (SB 865), which is currently held up due to election year concerns about a confidentiality provision.

In fact, *confidentiality* is itself one of the most controversial parts of this whole issue. To state it as briefly as possible, the data held in a government mandated identification system is subject to the "Freedom of Information" provisions of the state and/or federal law, while a voluntary system is not. A privately held system, e.g. managed by the livestock industry itself, is also protected by law from public access.

This is why so much has been said about keeping an ID system either voluntary or under the control of industry – or in some complicated versions as a partnership of government and industry working together. It needs to be understood by everyone concerned about this issue that the leaders of big livestock industry groups are very much interested in controlling all animal data through privatization. To that end, some of the more flamboyant warnings in the small farm community about loss of freedom and privacy have been welcomed by industry!

Another important consideration is whether individual animal ID would be accomplished using electronic means, e.g. with RFID tags that can be used to track animal movements through Global Positioning Systems or other means. In this case, cost becomes a potentially major factor, in addition to the obvious worry about civil liberties.

So, *privacy* and *cost* are the two biggest concerns that farmers of all stripes and sizes have expressed about NAIS in general. But sustainable farmers have an additional concern that is a little harder to summarize – in a word, it might be called *fairness*. And where does fairness count? It will count most in how smaller operations are treated when a reason for using the animal ID database arises . . . as with an outbreak of H5N1 Avian Influenza or other deadly animal disease.

It is difficult to say where anyone can go these days to find a consistently evenhanded approach for any of agriculture's ills. But one place we definitely know NOT to look is within the greedy clutches of big industry. For many of us, the government may only seem slightly better than industry in ensuring a fair system, but we need to keep in mind that it is easier to affect change in government, especially state government, than it would be working through the livestock industry.

With respect to the privacy issue, we also need to keep in mind that for farmers who already rely on direct, local markets for their livelihood, an open door, nothing-to-hide policy has been a tremendous market advantage. In fact, the NAIS can be understood in some respects as an industry attempt to gain some of the advantages that sustainable farmers already enjoy, while still avoiding public transparency.

In short, before we make privacy the main issue, we need to realize that openness is our main advantage in the marketplace. We thrive on transparency, and should insist on it at all levels of modern agriculture!

As an organization, then, we at PASA believe there is little to be gained in trying to pretend that the whole movement toward better premise/animal identification can be avoided, or that it would even be desirable to do so. It is clear, however, that much remains at stake in the ongoing process of implementation.

Our strong preference is that farms of any size that already take full responsibility for the animals they produce by going so far as to put a name on the label – a face on the food – should be exempted from participation in the NAIS, beyond establishment of a premise ID. This is in contrast to the full animal identification requirement that should be upheld in normal commodity marketing channels. We also believe that the interests of sustainable farmers, i.e. standards of fairness, are best maintained by state and/or local government, and not by the highly politicized halls of the USDA or the self-interested board rooms of the livestock industry.

It has always been a hallmark of PASA that we attempt to cut through the propaganda and hype that is unfortunately the normal, everyday fodder of agriculture today. That attitude in this case leads us to say that modern industrial agriculture, which is not going to disappear overnight, has brought us to this point where something like the NAIS is probably necessary to ensure public safety and proper regulation of the questionable farming systems that currently provide most of our nations food supply.

But this does not mean we have “lost the dream” or even failed to notice that the industrialists are still trying to block the ongoing progress of sustainable agriculture any way they can – I did just say in the last issue that there are “Tough Times Ahead.” In fact, with the fast-growing public interest in safe, healthy, naturally produced food, we may be entering a new phase of the struggle altogether.

Sustainable farmers long ago discovered and implemented the only true solution to concerns about food security . . . the farmer’s own reputation clearly staked on every package of food. As Kim Miller mentioned at this year’s conference, a time is approaching when even civil disobedience may be needed to drive home that point.

In the meantime, we will work to see that the ultimate cost of the solution made necessary by our industrial counterparts does not end up putting sustainable farms out of business. PASA members can keep an eye out for action alerts along those lines. And please, share with us your thoughts and ideas on this important topic when the spirit moves.