APHIS Factsheet

Veterinary Services

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The Evolution of the National Animal Identification System in the United States

A Tradition of Animal Identification

Animal identification has been around in some form or fashion for centuries. Cattle branding, for example, is one of the earliest known forms of livestock identification.

Back in the 1940s, the predecessor agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) initiated an extensive program to identify cattle vaccinated for brucellosis. The official brucellosis vaccination tag and ear tattoo provided the United States with a highly successful animal identification program for cattle for decades. Since brucellosis is close to being eradicated in the United States, however, that system of tagging and identification is being phased out rapidly.

Animal identification did not start or stop with brucellosis. Cattle branding was in practice long before the brucellosis program began. Right now, several other animal health programs include an animal identification component, and certain classes of livestock must be officially identified before entering interstate commerce. In addition, some animals must be identified before they can compete in shows or race on a track. So, there are multiple identification systems in place that exist for different purposes, but there is no nationwide animal identification system for all animals of any given species.

Animal identification is worthwhile to producers and animal owners for various reasons, including performance recording and marketing opportunities. However, APHIS is focused on animal identification for one reason alone: to establish the animal information foundation the agency needs to support its animal disease control, eradication, monitoring, and surveillance programs.

Individuals associated with animal industries recognize that finding potentially sick or exposed animals early in a disease outbreak is essential to containing the disease quickly. The national animal identification system (NAIS) will allow rapid tracing of animals during an outbreak situation, helping to limit the scope and expense of the outbreak and allowing APHIS to minimize the impact on domestic and foreign markets. The NAIS will also be critical as APHIS works to complete disease eradication programs in which the Federal government, States, and industry have invested many years and millions of dollars.

The NAIS is being developed for animal industries that will benefit from having a system in place that facilitates rapid tracing in the event of a disease concern. Currently, working groups are developing plans for alpacas and llamas, bison, cattle (beef and dairy), deer and elk, horses, goats, poultry, sheep, and swine.

Recent History: A Cooperative Effort Between Industry and Government

The plan for implementing the NAIS was already well underway when a case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy was detected in the United States in December 2003. With that in mind, USDA announced shortly after the finding that it would expedite the implementation of a verifiable national animal identification system. The NAIS has evolved over the course of several years with input from many sources. It continues to be refined and approved.

In 2002, APHIS officials worked with various organizations, including the National Institute for Animal Agriculture and the U.S. Animal Health Association, to help draft an animal identification plan. By 2003, this preliminary work plan was expanded upon by various State, Federal, and industry groups, resulting in the initial draft of the U.S. Animal Identification Plan (USAIP). Although early versions of the USAIP focused on food animals only, other nontraditional livestock species—such as alpacas, llamas, and horses—were incorporated into the plan.

The USAIP plan was an important step in moving toward the implementation of the NAIS. In particular, USDA is drawing from some of the data standards first established in the USAIP. However, the USAIP should not be viewed as an exact blueprint for the NAIS. USDA will continue to seek input from industry and other interested parties throughout the design and implementation of the NAIS. USDA will also post updates to its Web site as the system moves forward (http://www.usda.gov/nais).

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The NAIS is continually evolving as those responsible for its implementation receive input from various sources. For example, policymakers will incorporate the results of research being carried out through cooperative agreements between USDA and States and Tribes, and they will also review information submitted as part of an advance notice of proposed rulemaking or through USDA listening sessions. In addition, they will work to integrate recommendations they receive from various groups and organizations.

Additional Information

More information on the NAIS is available online at http://www.usda.gov/nais.

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