

Mandatory Animal Identification: What You Need to Know!

For several years, the USDA and other regulatory agencies have insisted that a national mandatory animal identification program is necessary for them to accomplish their role in protecting the health of the herds and flocks in the United States. They point to the fact that in the face of an animal disease outbreak, that animal identification is essential to tracing animals, limiting the spread of disease, and minimizing the losses. Recently, the outbreaks of exotic Newcastle Disease in California poultry, BSE (mad cow disease) in Canada, and tuberculosis in California, New Mexico, and Texas have been suggested as real time needs for mandatory identification. There is obvious truth to this argument. However, there are also a number of basic questions that must be answered before the beef industry can agree to adopt a national program.

Who pays for the program?

It has been argued that a national animal ID program is mainly needed for animal health purposes. For cattle this would include control of diseases such as tuberculosis, Foot & Mouth Disease, brucellosis, and BSE, some of which are also potential human health concerns. While cattle producers benefit, the general population also benefits greatly in terms of public health and the assurance of safe, inexpensive food. So who should pay for this program? The answer to this question depends on whom you ask. The answer is further complicated when you consider all the steps that might be involved in a national program. Let's just consider the beef cattle industry for example (setting aside the poultry industries, pork production, sheep production, and the dairy industry for the moment). A cow-calf producer would start by putting a standardized, approved ear tag or computerized implant or tag into the calves and/or cows before they could leave the ranch. At the auction yard or point of sale that ID information would be transferred to the new owner and this information may have to be entered into a database. There may be a number of other transfers before the animal reaches the feedlot (in the case of steers and heifers) or the slaughterhouse. A state database with this information would have to be maintained and it would need to be accessible by national agencies in the case of an emergency or outbreak. You can begin to imagine that the potential costs of such a program would be very high. If the individual ID were electronic, sensing devices would need to be at transfer points and if a numbering system were used, manual data transcription would be necessary. Also, livestock markets would probably be involved in some of these efforts and this could easily place an economic burden on them. You can begin to imagine the potential costs in terms of new equipment and personnel. As an industry we must carefully consider these possibilities and act to ensure any program is in our best economic interest.

Who will maintain and manage the database with the animal ID and transfer of ownership information?

Most likely, the state animal health officials will be responsible for this part of any program. This does not represent a major change for the beef cattle industry, as the state veterinarians' offices have managed that information for the only animal ID program—the Brucellosis vaccination program—that we have experience with. In California, this will not represent a major challenge, except for the concerns we all have with state budgets and fiscal management. If ID information has to be transferred at all points of sale, this would add to these concerns.

Who would have access to this databank?

This is also a very important question. Public access to governmental data must be limited to those with a legitimate use for that information. The cattle industry must work to help design any system properly to prevent abuse. This means all of us, not just one or two people in Sacramento or Washington D.C. A program that works well for Ohio may be a disaster in California or North Dakota.

Would a national ID program place unfair liability on the producer who first places an ear tag in a calf or cow?

This is a question that must be answered to the satisfaction of the cattle industry before we agree to any program, in my opinion. National ID programs in other countries cannot be used as our model in the United States. Our legal system and our society demand that we carefully consider this question before we ever enter into to this type of program.

Should a national ID program being started on a whole herd basis or only for certain age groups such as calves?

The Canadians have the most recent experience with this. In Canada, they started a mandatory individual ID program a little over a year ago. Their program started off by placing approved ID tags in the calves only, before the calves left their herd of origin. This spring the Canadians had a case of BSE in an adult cow. They still do not know the exact origin of this animal. So the first time the Canadians really needed their ID program, it was a failure. We should learn from our neighbors' experience.

What about the potential for the illegal use of ID tags, equipment, or records?

At times in the past, the illegal use of Brucellosis tags has occurred. Anytime a procedure is mandatory or adds value to cattle the possibility for abuse has to be considered. This is another important consideration for our industry.

Are there any demonstration herds we can use to help plan for a national ID program?

At this time, the USDA or other agencies have not shared with us any information from actual production herds and any proposed ID program. Real life experiences with a number of herds in different parts of the country would be extremely helpful in planning

an effective national program. Again, it is my personal opinion that this step should be taken before a universal program is started.

You can probably tell that I have a number of serious concerns about a mandatory national ID program for cattle or other livestock species. There could be many advantages; however, it could also be an expensive mistake. As you think about the ramifications of a mandatory ID program on your operation, I am sure you will add many questions to the list I have discussed. I encourage you to bring your questions and concerns to your local cattle association meetings, to discuss the issue, and to formulate plans that might be of benefit to you and your area. Become active and participate at the state and national levels. The California Cattlemen's Association and the NCBA are working on this issue, but they need your help at the local and state level in particular. The cattle industry is collectively smart enough to do this right—but we can't sit back and wait for someone else to make mistakes we would have to live with and pay for.

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