



# Livestock Identification #1 in a series for producers

## Cattle Identification and the National Animal Identification System

by John Maas, DVM  
University of California Cooperative Extension

November 2005

California has a long history of cattle identification programs beginning with the establishment of the missions and Spanish land grants. Each mission and land grant was assigned unique brands that could be used on the cattle under their ownership. These brands were tied to the specific mission or land grant owner. The brands established ownership of the cattle and connected the ownership to a specific premises (mission or land grant property). Other means of identification such as ear notching have been used along with hot iron brands for over 200 years in California. Brands were originally used to designate ownership and to prevent cattle theft; however, when disease problems did occur the brands have been widely used to help control or eradicate disease.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, various disease control and disease eradication programs were initiated. These programs required individual identification of cattle as well as premises identification. The individual animals were tested for diseases such as tuberculosis, so test results could be linked to a specific animal. Additionally, when heifers were vaccinated for brucellosis, a unique ear tag was applied to identify that animal and this was also linked to ownership at the time of vaccination. Some of these tags fell out however, so this system has never been perfect.

Seedstock producers and cow/calf producers use individual animal identification to enhance decisions with regard to animal performance and genetic selection. A whole industry has grown up with regard to individual cattle identification. This type of identification facilitates better recordkeeping thus enabling more informed management decisions. More recently it has become apparent that there is a need for a standardized identification system for all U.S. cattle. New requirements include source verification, age verification, and cattle tracking to help control diseases. Also, the use of ear tags for brucellosis vaccination—which is the identification system we have come to rely on—is being eliminated in many states. California still requires brucellosis vaccination of breeding heifers by law; however, only

about 40% of beef heifers are vaccinated while almost 100% of dairy heifers are still vaccinated and ear tagged.

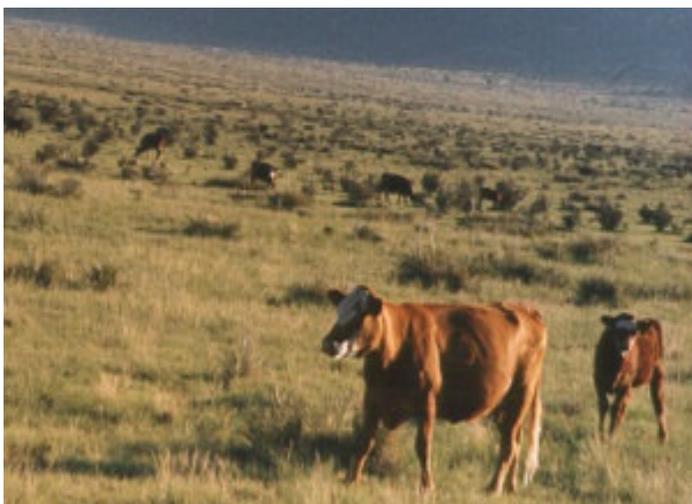
The National Animal Identification System (NAIS) has evolved since 2002 when industry leaders developed the United States Animal Identification Plan. The NAIS is the cooperative State-Federal-Industry program administered by USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) for the purpose of tracking all animal movements from birth to slaughter as part of the USDA's National Health Monitoring and Surveillance Program. The long-term goal of the NAIS is to trace back to all of the locations (premises) where a suspect animal has been during its life within 48 hours, and to provide information on all of the other animals that came in contact with the suspect animal at each premises.

Success of the NAIS will be dependent upon the development of a system infrastructure capable of collecting and recording the movement of animals. Another major objective of the NAIS is to enable State and Federal animal health officials to promptly ascertain animal health status for the purpose of issuing both intrastate and interstate animal health movement certificates.

The NAIS is now voluntary, so producers and other stakeholders can participate in design, development, and testing of the system to ensure that practical solutions are developed. However, to achieve the goal of 48-hour trace backs, all producers and affected industry segments will eventually have to participate. In the fall of 2007, USDA plans to establish mandatory animal identification and premises registration requirements. In January 2008, the final rules requiring premises registration and animal identification as defined under the NAIS program standards are scheduled to become effective. By January 2009, USDA anticipates that the animal tracking component of the NAIS will become mandatory. USDA will continue to support field trials and implementation of successful data collection systems to collect animal movement records.

The relationship between the NAIS and the 2002 Farm Bill's Country-of-Origin Labeling (COOL) provision is often misunderstood. As outlined above, the NAIS is a live animal traceability program with the objective of improving surveillance and traceback of animal disease and health issues, whereas COOL is a food-labeling program providing consumers with information on the country-of-origin of certain food products at the retail level. While the goals of these two programs are different, the NAIS will likely be complementary to the COOL program. Neither COOL nor the NAIS is a food safety program. However, the NAIS will increase the U.S. government's ability to respond to animal health and disease outbreaks, and this will ultimately contribute towards the safety of animals and meat products that enter into the food supply chain. For more information on this topic see the Western Extension Marketing Committee's fact sheet "The National Animal Identification System and Country-of-Origin Labeling: How are they Related?" <http://lmic.info/memberspublic/animalID/fs04.pdf>

As we go forward with individual animal identification, premises identification, and cattle tracking systems it is important to remember that we have a long history of using animal identification tools to provide benefits to owners and to control and eradicate cattle diseases. It is also important for producers to demand that new identification systems optimize their management options and provide them with potential economic benefits above and beyond disease control.



## **Information Resources**

California Department of Food and Agriculture, <http://www.cdfa.ca.gov/pais>

USDA/APHIS National Animal ID, <http://animalid.aphis.usda.gov/nais/index.shtml>

Beef Stocker USA, <http://www.beefstockerusa.org/>

Livestock Marketing Information Center, <http://lmic.info/memberspublic/animalID/AnimalID.htm>

International Livestock Congress, <http://www.livestockcongress.com/>

United States Animal ID Plan, <http://www.usaip.info/>

BEEF Magazine, <http://www.beef-mag.com/>  
National Institute for Animal Agriculture, <http://animalagriculture.org/>

NCBA Animal ID, <http://www.beefusa.org/AnimalID.aspx>

## **Acknowledgements**

The author and University of California Cooperative Extension committee would like to thank the California Department of Agriculture for providing the funds to develop this fact sheet and educational materials for Animal Identification. In addition, the committee appreciates the contributions of the Western Extension Marketing Committee.