



More Questions Than Answers

USDA's NAIS listening session in Louisville draws protest, calls for change

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By Lisa Munniksmma, HF managing editor

Will NAIS become mandatory? USDA's National Animal Identification System has been plagued by controversy since its initial implementation as a voluntary program in 2004. More Chances to Be Heard
Also during the listening session in Louisville, USDA representatives announced six additional listening sessions across the country. Remaining listening sessions are: Jefferson City, Mo.: June 9 Rapid City, S.D.: June 11 Albuquerque, N.M.: June 16 Riverside, Calif.: June 18 Raleigh, N.C.: June 25 Jasper, Fl.: June 27

With secretary of agriculture Tom Vilsack's call for a mandatory-participation program earlier this year, farmers and consumers became more vocal about their wishes and concerns with NAIS.

Listening sessions arranged around the country by USDA this spring are designed to collect feedback, brainstorm solutions and draw on the agriculture community's collective ideas to put a national ID program in place.

Photos by Lisa Munniksmma

More than 100 people attended the NAIS Listening session in Louisville, Ky. Approximately 100 people were in attendance at the Louisville, Ky., listening session on May 22. In the morning meeting, six people who spoke were representing groups that were in favor of a national ID program and approximately 30 were opposed to a new tracking system.

More questions were raised than solutions proposed by either side. One area that appeared to be frustrating to those in attendance was that while USDA representatives were present, no spokesperson was there to clear up misconceptions and answer questions directly.

Debate and Discussion

Attendees were given three minutes to speak during the morning meeting. In the afternoon, the attendees were broken into three groups and permitted to speak for as long as they wished, which encouraged dialog and better understanding from both sides of the issue.

All comments were recorded and will be analyzed by the NAIS staff.

More Comments Welcome

In addition to the taped feedback from these listening sessions, USDA is welcoming written comments, which can be submitted online or here.

Send comments by mail to:

ATTN NAIS
Surveillance and Identification Programs
National Center for Animal Health Programs
VS, APHIS
4700 River Rd., Unit 200
Riverdale, MD 20737



A group from the Community Farm Alliance spoke and protested during the NAIS listening session in Louisville. "I personally assure you that every written comment will be read and considered before we move forward," said Dr. Ulysses Lane of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. "At the end of the [listening session], we want to learn what program options you will support so we can pass that on to secretary Vilsack."

Speaking Up in Louisville

Those speaking against NAIS were largely from the small-farm community surrounding Louisville.

"The extra burden of NAIS at this point in time would destroy many family farms," said Dawn Oaks, who was in attendance for her husband, a farmer who couldn't attend because he was taking advantage of the much-needed dry weather for planting.

"You need to go where the [animal health] problem is, which is not on small, family farms," said Ben Secaur, a pastor and start-up farmer.

Those in favor of NAIS pointed to the need for a tracking system in the event of an animal-disease outbreak.

Kentucky farmer and noted author Wendell Berry said it's important to beat the initiative in order to "maintain some kind of basis of small farmers in this country." "We think the small farms will lose just as much as the big farms with an outbreak of animal disease. This is different than food safety," said Dennis Liptrap, a hog farmer who was representing the Kentucky Pork Producers Association at the meeting.

Even pro-NAIS attendees stated concerns with the program as it stands, however.

Speakers on both sides of the issue commented on NAIS's questionable role in food safety, although the USDA representatives in attendance stated that an animal-tracking system isn't designed to be a food-safety measure, rather one designed to minimize damage to the nation's livestock in the event of a disease outbreak.

The need for a more streamlined system was pointed out time and again, as well. As NAIS stands currently, confinement-operation-housed hogs and poultry, for example, aren't required to be individually identified, rather they can receive one number for the group as long as they are raised and transported in that same group; whereas hogs and chickens housed in pasture-based systems must each have their own ID number—a discrepancy that appears unfair to farmers.

Community Farm Alliance Media Event

During the lunch break, the Community Farm Alliance, a 2,000-member small-farm coalition based in central Kentucky, held a press conference in the parking lot of the meeting site to draw attention to their concerns with NAIS.

Noted author Wendell Berry, a Henry County, Ky., native, spoke adamantly regarding his feelings on NAIS: "It's really important that we beat this initiative with NAIS because ... it's really important that we maintain some kind of basis of small farmers in this country."

Approximately 60 people attended in support of an NAIS protest, and speakers included Berry, CFA president Adam Barr and Liberty Ark Coalition co-founder Karin Bergener. This was the first press conference of the sort to be held at a USDA listening session, and police were on hand but weren't needed.

Transcripts of the NAIS listening sessions will be posted online.