



## USDA drops mandatory NAIS proposal

### Announcement considered triumph for small farmers in America

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Due in large part to input and involvement from small farmers, rural advocacy organizations and others opposed to the large-scale government program, the USDA now reports that it is dropping the possibility of making the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) mandatory.

NAIS is a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) program administered by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. Its stated goal is to provide animal health officials with the capabilities to identify all livestock and premises that have had direct contact with a disease of concern within 48 hours after discovery. NAIS is a three-part program consisting of 1) premises identification for all U.S. farms; 2) animal identification via tagging, microchipping, etc.; and 3) animal tracking. As part of the process, standards and tagging devices for all livestock breeds are being developed, as are integrated databases to access to livestock information.

On October 31, 2006, the USDA held the NAIS Community Outreach Event in Kansas City, Mo., where Bruce I. Knight, Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs, announced that NAIS would remain voluntary. "We're making it crystal clear that NAIS is voluntary—no if's, and's or but's," he said. "Farmers can choose to register their premises. They can choose to participate in individual animal or group identification. And they can opt to be part of tracking. Or not."

However, with this announcement, Knight reiterated their belief that "choosing not to participate may limit marketing opportunities in the future." Knight explained that as NAIS matures and becomes more accepted in the marketplace, consumers will respond and begin seeking out—and paying a premium for—poultry and livestock whose history is readily available. "That's because more information means greater security."

Matt John of Shady Lane Poultry in Winchester, Ky., is a small poultry producer who is not entirely optimistic about the USDA's latest announcement. "Although in the latest version of NAIS guidelines, the USDA is declaring the program to be completely voluntary, I suspect many states will take steps to make it mandatory at the state level," he says. "Other programs such as the National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP) and Scrapie monitoring are currently voluntary at the federal level, but most states have laws requiring participation for intra- and inter-state commerce."

Further, he states "I can envision the USDA requiring participation in NAIS to have livestock or poultry processed under USDA inspection, participate in NPIP or other animal health programs, or receive federal agriculture loans, grants, CRP payments, crop or livestock subsidies etc. All of these are activities that farmers choose to participate in; however many farms depend on one or more of these programs to stay in business. Small farmers are going to need to become even more self-sufficient and constantly work to develop markets for value-added, specialty products that don't require government assistance to turn a profit."

Those speaking out on behalf of small farmers and small farmers themselves have been opposed to NAIS because of the large financial obstacles. Those opposed have stated that a mandatory NAIS could jeopardize farmers' privacy and their ability to earn a living. – HF editors