



Food for Thought: NAIS--Heating Up

Veterinarian and sustainable agriculture expert Ann Wells discusses the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) controversy.

06/01/2009

(Editors Note: "Food for Thought," a regular column by Carol Ekarius, runs in most every issue of Hobby Farms. For the July-August 2009 Hobby Farms, we posted the "Food for Thought" column online. We hope you have a chance to read and comment.)

by Carol Ekarius

In March, secretary of agriculture Tom Vilsack said he would consider making the USDA's National Animal ID System (NAIS) mandatory.

Since NAIS is of great concern to large- and small-scale farmers and ranchers as well as backyard livestock owners, I decided this month's "Food for Thought" column should be dedicated to the topic.

Rather than interview an author or documentary producer as I usually do in this venue, I turned to Ann Wells, DVM, of Praire Grove, Ark.

Although we've never met in person, I've become virtual friends and colleagues with Dr. Wells over the last decade or so. She's not only a shepherd, but also one of the leading small-ruminant (sheep and goats) consulting veterinarians in the country, and she served for nine years as a livestock specialist at what's now known as the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service.

I chose Dr. Wells because I know she has a strong and balanced view on NAIS—both the benefits and the problems.

A Recap
NAIS was proposed under a draft plan released by the USDA in 2004.

The plan proposed registration of all livestock "premises," from farms to backyards, or anyplace where livestock animals are kept—from a single horse or a single chicken in suburbia to giant feedlots and poultry houses containing thousands of animals.

It also called for the use of Radio Frequency IDs (RFID) or injectable transponders to track individual animals, with the information kept in a national database for tracking all animal movements.

In other words, taking your horses for a trail ride? Report their movements. Showing a couple of chickens at the county fair? Report their movements.

USDA's justification for NAIS is that it will help protect the health and economic well-being of the country's livestock and poultry by enabling efficient tracing of an animal disease to its source.

However, the program development was backed in part by an industry-led group that counts among its members some of the biggest corporate players in United States meat production (for example, National Pork Producers, Monsanto and Cargill Meat), manufacturers and marketers of high-tech animal-identification equipment, and industrial farms.

One area of the plan that has caused much controversy is a giant loophole: The corporate farms could get a single identification number for all of the animals on their premises, whereas we small, diversified producers need to register each and every animal.

To say the least, the program, which was billed as voluntary, has been extremely controversial with many farmers, ranchers and backyard livestock owners, many of whom are refusing to voluntarily sign up. Thus, Vilsack brought forth the comment about making the program mandatory, and a new round of heated debate erupted.

NAIS Pluses and Minuses



Dr. Wells says, in theory, the upside of the NAIS “would help to more quickly locate herds or flocks of animals that were exposed to a potentially life-threatening or economically threatening disease. I tend to think of things like avian flu and foot-and-mouth disease but probably mad cow as well.”

NAIS, it turns out, probably wouldn't stop disease outbreaks (something I think most of us would support), but in truth, no one really knows.

“There isn't really strong scientific evidence—no studies or models—suggesting how effective this could be, so are we spending hundreds of millions for something that may not be effective,” Dr. Wells explains. “That is a point that needs to be made to Congress. I think the Congress members who funded this probably just thought it would be easy to ID every premise and every animal, but there are giant challenges.

“Anyone who raises animals realizes that if there's a way to lose a tag, animals will do it. Lost tags would have to be replaced with tags that bear the same ID number. No one knows how much that will cost.

“Also, you have data overload. There would be trillions of bits of information, and no one has tested how tracing back that information would work in an actual outbreak.

“And finally, nobody has figured out how to pay for it. If every animal owner has to buy tags, and a reader, and collect all this data on all these animals, and enter it into databases and so on, and so on, and so on, who is going to pay for all that? The cost could be enormous, but no one knows.”

An NAIS Alternative?

As currently proposed, NAIS obviously has shortcomings, but there must be other solutions to developing a system of protecting human health and the economic vitality of the livestock industry.

Some of the suggestions we discussed include: Set a scale-of-production exemption. “I don't think, for example, that anybody raising fewer than 100 sheep or a few hundred chickens would bring—nor likely fuel the transmission of—such diseases as avian flu or foot-and-mouth disease,” she says.

Provide exception for all closed herds or those where the farmer only introduces additional animals from nearby through private-treaty sales until those animals hit the commercial system. In other words, when the animals are sent to a sale barn, they would be tagged at that juncture. This makes the most sense, because this is when the animals get into the system and when disease exposure and transmission risks increase.

Close loopholes and create additional monitoring on live-animal imports, as many of the diseases of concern are imported into this country. Require all imported livestock to meet health and safety standards identical to those established for the United States, including adherence to prohibitions against certain feed ingredients, pesticide use on feedstuffs and certain livestock pharmaceuticals.

Allow individual meat processors to optionally test—and advertise the results—for “mad cow.” Current law prohibits small-scale farmers and packers from doing so. If we're serious about the protection of human health, this would be a logical step.

As it relates to human health, fully fund and increase plant inspectors at large packing plants. The most critical food-safety issue for the meat and dairy industries relate to E. coli and other bacterial outbreaks that will not be prevented by NAIS. These health issues are prevented by not allowing manure in our food; that has nothing to do with tracing animals and everything to do with the sanitary handling and preparation of the country's food supply.

USDA should work with groups like the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy to identify genetically important groups of animals that can be preserved during an outbreak of disease. Typically in an outbreak, all of the animals in a geographic area are slaughtered, but in the case of heritage breeds, their genetics are critical for preservation.

USDA needs to do a more detailed cost analysis. They could select a university herd or track the animals that pass through one of the major sale barns and really follow those animals throughout their lives to understand the cost and effectiveness of the program prior to any mandatory implementation.

With a vested interest in the outcome of the NAIS program, livestock owners need to actively participate in USDA listening sessions.



“We little people really can be heard if we deliver a uniform and consistent message,” says Dr. Wells.

About the Author: Carol Ekarius is an HF contributing editor and author of *Hobby Farm: Living Your Rural Dream for Pleasure and Profit* (BowTie Press, 2005).