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Organic and small farm advocates team up to kill animal ID system

By Stewart Doan

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There is a coordinated effort to eliminate the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) that would offer trace back within 48 hours in the event a contagious livestock disease is discovered in the United States. The effort was on full display at the eight NAIS listening sessions held by USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) prior to the Memorial Day weekend. Seven more sessions are planned in the coming weeks.

Under pressure from Rep. Collin Peterson, chairman of the House Agriculture Committee and Rep Rosa DeLauro, chairwoman of the House Ag Appropriations Subcommittee, to mandate livestock and poultry producer participation in NAIS, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said he set up the listening tour because he needs to gain more information from stakeholders before he decides on the future of an animal ID system.

Vilsack personally has attended only two of the sessions thus far, but has reviewed transcripts of each session, a USDA spokesman told *Agri-Pulse*.

An overwhelming majority of speakers at listening tour stops last week in Pasco, WA; Austin, TX; Birmingham, AL; and Louisville, KY. voiced strong opposition to NAIS in any form and urged Vilsack to immediately halt implementation of the program. The few speakers who expressed support for a mandatory ID system mainly represented state livestock regulatory agencies, cattle feeders and hog farmers affiliated with the National Pork Producers Council.

"Increasingly, we are seeing consumers join forces with farmers in letting the USDA know that NAIS is not a solution for animal health, food safety or food security," said Judith McGeary, executive director of the Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance (FRFA), who spoke at the Austin meeting and submitted approximately 2,000 pages of petition signatures in opposition to NAIS.

In a separate interview with *Agri-Pulse*, McGeary confirmed the FRFA was working with the National Family Farm Coalition and other small-farm groups to encourage anti-NAIS turnout at the sessions and said she was pleased with the results so far.

“Not at all,” she replied when asked if she was surprised by the lack of people speaking in favor of NAIS. “The simple fact is that small farmers, people who own a few animals, consumers – we are the majority by a huge percentage in terms of number of people,” said McGeary, “**And we’ve been loud enough and strong enough that USDA has agreed that it needs to, at the very least, give the appearance of paying attention to (our) concerns.**”

Indeed, a major part of the audience in Austin consisted of small-scale livestock operations and consumers who have no livestock but **fear NAIS is a government plot to steal away freedoms, or in some way raise the cost of the local “small” producer to a point where they will be forced out of business.**

Jerry Cunningham, an organic farmer who raises 4,000 hens and 25 head of cattle in Elgin, TX, began his remarks with a message to Vilsack: “**You’ve not only lost our trust, you’ve lost our respect ... You have managed to galvanize us and really piss off hundreds of thousands of us common folks. We’ve had government run down our throat way too long.**”

Cunningham also complained about USDA’s use of taxpayer dollars to fund cooperative agreements with such groups as the **National Pork Board, National FFA and the American Angus Association in order to promote premises registration.** Many of the same themes were heard in Louisville.

Mark Haney, president of the 470,000 member Kentucky Farm Bureau, which supports a national animal ID program but has no official position on whether producer participation should be voluntary or mandatory, acknowledged that the “financial impact on small farms, where margins are already thin, could be devastating.” Kentucky has the largest cattle herd east of the Mississippi River.

“We think the national system should be cost effective with adequate cost-share among government, industry and producers,” explained Haney, who also raised concerns about the confidentiality of producers’ information.

Adam Barr, president of the smaller Community Farm Alliance, an organization that claims to be committed to family-scale farming, argued that a mandatory animal ID system would place an undue burden on the farmers he represents.

“NAIS is clearly stacked in favor of those industrialized farmers that need NAIS to keep their export markets open,” according to Barr, whose members wore t-shirts emblazoned with an image of a mock NAIS-approved ID tag with a bright red slash through it. “But the system will put animal producers in local markets out of business and help to destroy a growing local food movement.”

Barr’s comments were echoed by Wendell Berry, the noted author, sustainable farming advocate and defender of agrarian values, who operates a farm near Louisville.

“The need to trace animals was made by the confined animal industry, which are essentially disease-breeding operations. The remedy is to put animals back on pasture where they belong,” asserted Berry, 75, who criticized the presence of two Kentucky State Troopers at the meeting but told **APHIS officials he understood the purpose of civil disobedience and was willing to go to jail in “opposition to your (NAIS) program.”**