Animal ID pilots show real-life challenges and opportunities

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If lawmakers decided today to make animal identification mandatory, it could be years before 100% of all species are registered in a way that allows 48-hour traceability. At least that's one of the "take home" messages from a report on several state pilot programs, financed by $6.6 million in USDA grants.

Why would it take so long? The technology isn't always available or doesn't always work as planned, a great deal of training and educational outreach will be required, and quite frankly, some livestock owners will do anything possible to make sure the system doesn't work. Here's a sampling of some of the reports:

Texas: The Texas Animal Health Commission discovered that some livestock owners "simply will not identify their animals, even if the identification devises are subsidized by the state. In addition, producers who may initially foresee some benefit from participating in animal identification and animal tracing may be dissuaded by pressure from their peers from identifying their animals." The biggest challenge, TAHC concluded, "would not be with the technology itself, which functioned well by the end of the pilot project, but rather with fostering positive attitudes among livestock owners towards the technology."

Oklahoma: This pilot focused on tracing animal movements at various marketing points, such as livestock auctions, preconditioning facilities and a gathering station. "Owners/operators were unwilling to alter their chutes for good performance --- alleys were too wide for single file reading, tag readers were too close to holing pens and steel plates provided radio signal interference." In addition, the report noted that "equipment relied too much on WiFi and Bluetooth wireless signals, which frequently failed."

Kansas: This pilot looked at using RFID technology in multi-deck commercial trailers to monitor movements of cattle and swine. Their conclusion: About 75% of animal identification numbers could be adequately captured in a laboratory setting, but only 50% could be accurately captured in a real-world environment. Advancements in RFID reader technology as well as greater availability of RFID transponders would allow electronic animal identification to reach it's full potential, according to the summary.

South Dakota. This pilot project equipped livestock auction markets to scan cattle and collect data. At some markets, producers would not allow employees to scan their cattle and there were problems with signal interference and equipment performance. However, a little training and experience dramatically improved the process. Panel reading equipment was at 85-95 percent of the speed of commerce when equipment was functioning properly. By October 2006, 150 producers and 13 processors were licensed in the SOUTH DAKOTA CERTIFIED ™ Beef project and using components of the NAIS.

Success stories

Indeed, there were several successes among the pilot programs. For example, Florida's pilot demonstrated that animal identification can add value for producers, providing $56,000 in premiums to 6,500 cattle during an industry sponsored heifer sale. The Minnesota project found that RFID technology can improve animal and human safety in auction markets because it reduced the need to restrain animals when recording their individual ID numbers. And in Pennsylvania, participants learned that information collected through the Dairy Herd Improvement (DHI) program integrated well with the National Animal Identification System (NAIS).

Bruce Knight, who serves as Undersecretary for Marketing and Inspection Services, said he chose to put the "relatively unvarnished" report on USDA's web site because he believes in transparency and wants others to understand the scope of the challenges.

"We are going to have successes and failures," he emphasizes. "If we didn't have failures, we really didn't need the pilot. Still, other countries, like Canada, seemed to have figured this out.

Knight says the pilot programs indicate that "a healthy dose of common sense" is required to implement a national system. "Clearly, one size doesn't fit all. What will work with one species in one part of the country won't necessarily work with the other."

Some of the leaders in the auction community say RFID won't work, says Knight. "But we have examples of how it did. To me, you can make these things work if you really want them to function. It really comes down to the commitment of people in that state to animal ID."

For a copy of the pilot projects report, go to:
http://animalid.aphis.usda.gov/nais/naislibrary/documents/plans_reports/PilotProjectReportFINAL05-01-2007.pdf

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