

Knight aims to revive Animal Identification efforts

By Sara Wyant, Editor, Agri-Pulse

Over the years, USDA officials have implemented hundreds of programs with great confidence and skill. Then there is the National Animal Identification System (NAIS), which some have nicknamed the “Katrina” of USDA rollouts. Developed with the best of intentions, the program has been tossed about and bruised so many different times, that if it had a mother, some sources speculate that she might not recognize it---or even claim it.

Bruce Knight intends to fix the problem. In his new role as Undersecretary for Marketing and Inspection Services, he’s been charged with setting the NAIS upright, getting the key messages and benefits aligned, and actually demonstrating that people will register their premises first; animals second and eventually enable 48-hour traceability. It’s a monumental task, for sure. But it’s not the first or last challenge that an ag policy veteran like Knight has encountered during his years on Capitol Hill, working for numerous commodity organizations, and most recently, serving as Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.



In the last five months since he took the Undersecretary position, Knight’s conducted what he described as a “walking the fields” tour, trying to talk to all sectors of the industry and better understand the issues and investments in the program. His primary focus is on making the NAIS a practical system that’s focused on animal health.

“One of the things I saw that had been lost along the way in the debate was that the individual farmer and his or her neighbors are the ultimate beneficiary of the animal ID program. Because of the controversy over a mandatory program, folks were losing track of the fact that this was about how to protect your own herd health in the event of a disease outbreak,” he told A-P during a recent interview.

"We needed to move beyond the debate," said Knight, so a voluntary system was adopted. Don’t worry about the “M” word, he tells crowds at farm and ranch venues across the country, USDA will not make this a mandatory system.

Of course, the mandatory concept was not the only factor keeping producers awake at night. Producers worry about liability, confidentiality, and cost. “We still really don't know what the program is going to be and how all of the data is going to work together,” noted AFBF President Bob Stallman during a press conference Tuesday. **“It remains to be seen how USDA is going to deal with those issues.”**

Partly because of the emerging technology and the highly distributed nature of the delivery system, some of the folks in charge of implementation haven't exactly been marching in lockstep with top USDA officials. If you look at the numerous states, where USDA officials invested various amounts of dollars to help with the registration effort, you'll find little consistency in the key messages about why the NAIS is important. Showcase states, like Wisconsin, offer an impressive menu of benefits and explanations about the animal identification program and also have an impressive track record. Over 100 % of their premises are already registered. However, they had a little bit of a head start. Wisconsin was the first state in the nation to mandate livestock premises registration after the Wisconsin Legislature passed a law mandating premises data by Nov. 1, 2005. Compare this to sites in Alabama and North Dakota, where you are linked on the web only to a premises identification form with no additional explanation. In Montana, officials are still working on their web site and on-line registration, but you can try the phone number listed.

Knight said about 343,000 livestock premises, representing nearly a quarter of those premises nationwide, have enrolled in USDA's program. That's in line with USDA's goal of 25% by the end of this month. Finding a majority of livestock premises by 2009 will be a much tougher task.

A "big push" this year will be to get livestock producers who raise animals destined for human consumption to enroll their premises. Look for USDA to announce grants and partnerships with a broader array of livestock industry groups and handlers in the near future---part of a plan that will hopefully be able to dramatically move the measurement "needle" in the right direction. "I'm very cognizant that one size does not fit all and we are developing strategies to make animal ID work with each of the species groups," adds Knight.

Industry organizations are already bringing different concepts to the table. For example, the pork producers recently sent USDA a letter, checking to see if premises identifications could be a requirement as a condition of sale, explains Knight. "We are checking to see if that would violate in any way, shape or form The Packers and Stockyards Act.

Knight says that, **as restaurants, retail outlets and consumers demand information, more producers will voluntarily register.** The lack of an animal tracking mechanism is already putting the U.S. at a competitive disadvantage internationally, compared to Australia and Canada, where systems already exist. **"We want U.S. producers to be competitive with the safest, most wholesome" product available anywhere,"** he said.

Members of the House Agriculture Committee are expected to size up the animal identification picture during oversight hearings in the next few weeks. Thus far, **House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson is convinced that a mandatory approach is the only way to go. "We've spent close to \$100 million and we don't have a hell of a lot to show for it,"** he noted during the AFBF convention this week.

“We may have more livestock, but the Australians spent about \$10 million and the Canadians spent \$6 million (to get their systems in place). It seems that we should be done by now.”

Note: We’ve listed below the state by state premises registrations numbers so you can see how these compare to the numbers we last published in August. States highlighted in gold have registered over 50% of their premises. Source: USDA’s APHIS.

STATE	Estimated no. of premises in state (NASS data as of 12-26-06)	NAIS Premises Registered as of 8-14-06	NAIS Premises Registered as of 12-26-06	Percent of Premises Registered as of 12-26-06
AK	354	3	39	11.0%
AL	35,538	2,461	3,122	8.8%
AR	37,614	6,307	6,898	18.3%
AZ	5,170	519	523	10.1%
CA	32,500	3,356	4,350	13.4%
CO	22,951	5,871	5,528	24.1%
CT	2,539	0	16	0.6%
DE	1,553	500	651	41.9%
FL	28,731	3,120	3,680	12.8%
GA	35,431	2,223	2,477	7.0%
HI	1,391	226	282	20.3%
IA	47,273	7,556	11,330	24.0%
ID	18,754	15,325	17,912	95.5%
IL	30,046	5,117	5,822	19.4%
IN	34,790	13,051	24,428	70.2%
KS	39,346	3,863	4,489	11.4%
KY	61,251	7,587	9,759	15.9%
LA	19,677	625	937	4.8%
MA	3,555	1,423	1,683	47.3%
MD	7,837	1,209	1,301	16.6%
ME	4,213	376	399	9.5%
MI	29,011	14,674	16,153	55.7%
MN	44,193	9,562	11,476	26.0%
MO	79,018	8,353	11,959	15.1%
MS	29,312	849	1,190	4.1%
MT	19,708	572	751	3.8%
NC	36,412	3,065	4,760	13.2%
ND	14,085	7,634	7,892	56.0%
NE	30,841	9,448	10,517	34.1%
NH	2,277	28	36	1.6%
NJ	5,315	475	988	18.6%
NM	11,250	777	821	7.3%
NV	4,785	1,046	1,123	44.5%
NY	25,559	13,609	13,229	51.8%
OH	48,073	1,860	2,136	4.4%
OK	71,420	3,424	4,703	6.6%

OR	28,634	2,210	2,306	8.1%
PA	42,302	30,011	26,255	62.1%
RI	504	0	5	1.0%
SC	16,120	1,653	1,852	11.5%
SD	22,356	4,241	4,685	21.0%
TN	68,010	10,613	12,174	17.9%
TX	187,118	18,710	23,204	12.4%
UT	12,460	7,615	8,080	64.8%
VA	37,673	3,182	3,988	10.6%
VT	4,438	79	293	6.6%
WA	22,155	1,161	1,359	6.1%
WI	51,373	53,480	53,989	105.1%
WV	17,670	7,837	8,417	47.6%
WY	8,277	418	727	8.8%
TOTAL	1,438,280	297,304	340,694	23.7%