

R-CALF United Stockgrowers of America

"Fighting for the U.S. Cattle Producer"

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Op-Ed

NAIS Will Hamper Cattle Disease Traceback Efforts

This 671-word piece is authored by R-CALF USA Animal Identification Committee Chair Kenny Fox, a 3rd generation cow/calf producer who has fought tirelessly against NAIS since 2003. For a mug shot of Fox, contact R-CALF USA Communications Coordinator Shae Dodson.

Billings, Mont. / Belvidere, S.D. – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) wants cattle owners to register their real property, as well as each animal they own, in a new federal database. This is the first step in USDA's plan to implement a National Animal Identification System (NAIS). USDA claims NAIS would reduce disease spread by shortening the time it takes to identify the birthplace of cattle suspected of disease.

If it sounds too good to be true, it generally is.

After USDA forces producers to register their property and cattle in its federal database, the agency will replace the numbering systems now used on existing disease-oriented identification devices with a new numbering system that includes an "840" prefix. This "840" prefix is the international number assigned to the United States of America. Under NAIS, all cattle born in the U.S. would be identified with a string of numbers beginning with the "840" prefix. To determine where in the United States an individual animal was born, however, health officials must first access the federal NAIS database – and hope there are no errors in the database, which would contain 100 million or more "840" prefix numbers for U.S. cattle.

If an answer is found by following the money, it's generally right.

This "840" system benefits multinational meatpackers who now must pay premiums to U.S. cattle producers so they will voluntarily participate in value-added programs that verify the U.S. origin of their cattle. This value-added service makes the beef from their cattle eligible for export. But, under USDA's mandate, all cattle born in the U.S. would officially be verified as having a U.S. origin, and no longer would meatpackers have to pay any premiums to U.S. cattle producers. What a deal!

If something smells fishy, it generally is.

But, what does this international "840" prefix – which is paramount to the government's NAIS – have to do with shortening the time to trace a suspected diseased animal back to its birthplace? Nothing.

The most important component of USDA's NAIS scheme – the "840" number assigned to all U.S.-born livestock – has no value in tracing an animal suspected of disease back to its birthplace. How could it? Every bull, cow, heifer and steer in the U.S. that does not have an official foreign import marking, as is presently required for all cattle imported from both Canada and Mexico, is already known to originate in the United States. The "840" prefix provides U.S. health officials with no information they do not already have.

If you suspect your government is lying, quit supporting its nonsense.

NAIS is designed to increase the profitability of multinational meatpackers that want cattle producers to pay the market cost of verifying the U.S. origin of beef destined for export. NAIS accomplishes this by eliminating the current disease-oriented numbering system that uses 50 different prefixes to identify which of the 50 states the animal is from and the numbering sequence that identifies the local veterinarian who applied the identification device to the animal.

Under the existing system, a cow suspected of a disease anywhere in the U.S. would bear a metal eartag with a prefix number that identifies the state from which the animal originated. With a phone call to that state, the identity of the local veterinarian who applied the eartag and the location of the original owner could be found. Quarantine and other containment measures, if necessary, could immediately be initiated – no waiting to access a computer to access the NAIS database, no worry that data in the NAIS database may be corrupted, and no need for the federal government to maintain private data on citizens.

I urge you to contact your U.S. Senators and Representative to tell them to put a stop to this NAIS nonsense. The role of government is to protect, not to give multinational meatpackers an advantage in the international market. To learn how the government can improve our nation's ability to prevent and control livestock diseases without infringing on the rights and privileges of cattle producers, visit www.r-calfusa.com and click on "Animal ID."

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R-CALF USA (Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund, United Stockgrowers of America) is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the continued profitability and viability of the U.S. cattle industry. R-CALF USA represents thousands of U.S. cattle producers on trade and marketing issues. Members are located across 47 states and are primarily cow/calf operators, cattle backgrounders, and/or feedlot owners. R-CALF USA directors and committee chairs are extremely active unpaid volunteers. R-CALF USA has dozens of affiliate organizations and various main-street businesses are associate members. For more information, visit www.r-calfusa.com or, call 406-252-2516.

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