

U.S. Tracking Diseased Animals: A System in Need of Repair

By Theo Emery / Washington Thursday, May. 07, 2009

Even as the swine flu headlines recede, a contentious policy debate over a disease-surveillance program for livestock is emerging. Known as the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) it has proven to be deeply unpopular across the country four years after its launch. And attempts to implement it more widely face grass-roots opposition and stubborn resistance from farmers, ranchers and other livestock producers.

Swine Flu Hits Mexico

The goal of NAIS was to create a system able to pinpoint the source of a disease within 48 hours, contain its spread and track infected animals, whether pigs, cattle, chicken, goats or geese. To do that, the system relies on registration of premises where livestock are found — farms, markets, feedyards — and assignment of tracking numbers to animals. Large animals would each receive individual numbers and, in the case of cattle, radio frequency ID tags; others, such as pigs and poultry, would be assigned lot numbers in groups. But so far, only about 35% of farms and other livestock premises are part of the system. (Read the Five Don'ts of Swine Flu)

Just before H1N1's outbreak, the Obama administration launched a review of the disease-tracking system to determine whether the program should become mandatory, instead of voluntary, as it now is. On Tuesday, members of two Congressional subcommittees questioned officials from the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Homeland Security about why the system has been so problematic, and in particular its implications for H1N1, which is a genetic mash-up of human, pig and bird flu. (See pictures of how thermal screening tracks the virus.)

John Clifford, the Department of Agriculture's deputy administrator for veterinary services, pointed out to the subcommittee members that H1N1 is not a food safety issue, and the virus has not been detected in swine in the United States. But NAIS would come into play should the virus infect U.S.

livestock, he said, acknowledging a case in which a Canadian carpenter apparently carried a form of the virus to a farm in Alberta and infected both pigs and people there, raising the specter — as yet unfounded — of the disease spreading through livestock and not just people. Clifford is circumspect about talking directly about H1N1, but said effective surveillance is key to tracking any disease that affects livestock. (Read a story about why you shouldn't blame the pig for swine flu.)

U.S. Representative Yvette Clarke, a New York Democrat, asked how long it now takes to track an animal disease to its origins. Clifford's answer did little to allay concern: it can currently take, for example, almost 200 days — more than six months — to find the source of tuberculosis in cattle. Thomas McGinn, the chief vet for the Department of Homeland Security, showed a slide illustrating livestock movement between states, saying that about 3,000 pigs leave North Carolina every day and 50,000 cattle depart Kansas daily. "At the current participation level, it could take months to locate exposed animals, increasing the spread of disease through the nation," McGinn said.

The cost of NAIS is high. According to a study USDA released last week, full implementation would cost \$228 million annually. But not doing so would be even more expensive, it found: the status quo could cost the country \$13.2 billion annually if foreign markets shut out U.S. meat for health reasons.

Despite the potential for economic catastrophe, the program has been highly controversial, confusing, and, in many rural parts of the country, downright detested. There are a number of reasons. Many small farmers feel that the program unfairly burdens them with costs they can't carry. Organic farmers say the program protects agri-business from their own unhealthy practices on factory farms. Some religious farmers feel that the Bible forbids assigning numbers to animals; others, like the Amish, object to the technology involved. Many farmers are anxious about privacy. Other critics broadly support the concept of animal traceability, but think it should be done entirely by private industry, and that it should be voluntary.

Walter Jeffries, a Vermont pig farmer whose anti-NAIS website is popular with other opponents, fears that the flu outbreak will be used as further justification for the program, which he feels benefits large producers and "does nothing of benefit for the small farmers and almost nothing for American consumers." Says Jeffries in an e-mail to TIME: "H1N1 will be used

as a justification by the pro-NAIS groups. Any time there is any animal disease they do this. Not that NAIS would help prevent the diseases at all. H1N1 isn't even an animal disease — it comes from people, is transmitted by people and kills people (in very small numbers)."

About three weeks ago, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack assembled a group of men and women around an antique conference table at the department's D.C. headquarters. He had invited roughly two dozen representatives of food industry and farm groups — Jeffries among them — for the first of a series of meetings about whether NAIS should be mandatory. He listened for two hours to a wide range of opinions. Then he politely thanked the group, according to a transcript, and left them with this thought: "I want you, as you leave here today, to think about the cost of crisis, and I want you to think about how well we decide things in the context of crisis."

About 10 days later, the news broke about H1N1.

Don Hoenig, president of the U.S. Animal Health Association and the state veterinarian with the Maine Department of Agriculture, was at the table that day. He told Vilsack that the nation's system of animal identification is broken, calling it "a Wright Brothers-style airplane in the space age."

He reiterated that statement several weeks later, saying that the country needs a better way to contain animal diseases. "Those of us involved in animal health regulation recognize that we need a much more effective system," he said, "and we don't have it right now."