

Protecting Our Right to Own Animals: A Call to Action

by Judith McGeary¹

For several years, big industrial agriculture companies and technology companies have been urging the USDA and state agencies to require every person who owns even one livestock or poultry animal to register their property, tag each animal, and report their movements. This massive regulatory program, called the National Animal Identification System (“NAIS”), is touted as an animal health program. But neither the government nor the industry have provided any scientific support for the claim that it is necessary or that it is a significant improvement over existing programs, such as scrapie. The proponents also have failed to provide a cost-benefit analysis. In reality, NAIS is driven by concerns about the export market. It’s a corporate welfare program for the benefit of multinational agribusiness, microchip manufacturers, and database providers.

The NAIS will apply to anyone who owns even one livestock or poultry animal, whether it is a rancher with a herd of Boer goats, or a grandmother with a few laying hens for fresh eggs, or a kid with a pet Shetland pony. Each person will be required to register their property with the state and federal government, tag each animal (in most cases, using electronic forms of identification such as microchips or RFID tags), and report a long list of movements to a database within 24 hours after they occur. The factory farms will be able to use group identification to avoid the major costs and paperwork burdens of the program, but independent ranchers who do not run “vertically integrated” operations will have to tag each individual animal.

The NAIS goes far beyond the scrapie program. The premises registration attaches to the land (not the flock), raising questions about the impact on the title and resale. Identification would be required of all animals, not just breeding stock. And while the scrapie program requires no work beyond the initial tagging, the NAIS would impose extensive time and paperwork burdens in required reporting of movements. Although USDA claims that the program is “technology neutral,” there has been a clear push towards RFID tagging. In fact, given the 24-hour reporting requirement, non-electronic forms of identification could actually impose greater burdens – imagine having to transcribe each animal’s 15-digit number and then entering those numbers into the report by hand.

The USDA released its original plan in 2005, calling for the program to become mandatory after an initial voluntary period. Due to public outcry, the USDA then stated that the program would be “voluntary at the federal level.” But the agency has continued to push state implementation of NAIS through federal funding and pressure, and states across the country have used a variety of coercive and misleading tactics to force animal owners into NAIS. Children in Colorado were kicked out of the State Fair for not being registered and farmers in drought-stricken Tennessee

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were denied disaster relief, while horse owners in New York simply had their data taken when they had Coggins tests performed. But the grassroots opposition has also seen victories. The USDA's original timeline called for NAIS to be mandatory by January 2009, which hasn't happened, and the agency has not set a new timeline. Five states – Arizona, Kentucky, Missouri, Nebraska, and Utah – have adopted laws barring their state agencies from mandating NAIS.

The issue has now reached a crucial turning point. Several Congressional leaders are pushing for a mandatory program, and USDA Secretary Vilsack has made the export market a high priority, even though the U.S. is a net importer of all livestock and meat, and even more so for goats and goat meat. The USDA plans to hold a series of regional listening sessions in the coming months, providing an opportunity for animal owners to let the agency know what they think about NAIS. **It is critical that farmers and consumers speak up to protect our food supply.** Keep an eye out for announcements about these sessions, because you can have a significant impact by attending and encouraging others to attend! If you cannot attend a session in person, you can submit written comments to the agency.

Go to www.FarmAndRanchFreedom.org or call 512-243-9404 for more information on how you can take action to protect your right to own animals and to farm.

FARFA's mission statement: FARFA advocates for farmers, ranchers, and homesteaders through public education and lobbying to assure their independence in the production and marketing of their food, and to prevent the imposition of unnecessary regulatory burdens that are not in the public interest. FARFA also advocates for consumers' access to information and resources to obtain healthy foods of their choice. FARFA promotes connections between rural and urban communities to support diversified, local agricultural systems.