

Animal Identification excerpt from
Transcript of Secretary Mike Johanns remarks to The National Cattlemen's Beef Association
Annual Meeting - Denver, Colorado

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Let me conclude by talking about an issue that is important to all of you, an issue about which there are many questions. I suspect questions will continue -- the issue of the National identification system. I'd like to answer some of the questions that we have heard are being asked.

First though I would like to commend the NCBA members for showing tremendous leadership in the industry-led animal ID effort. The new U.S. animal identification organization has presented its database to us. That represents real progress. Now we feel as you do that the ID system must be grounded in partnership. Our longstanding goals remain, to move forward quickly without causing unnecessary burden on producers and without unduly increasing the size of government.

We believe that the system that we've been talking about, the meta-data system would get this job done-- which brings me to the questions that we have heard.

Now some have asked whether this system is a retreat from our position that private databases should contain the animal movement data. Let me assure you that I'm not changing course. Some time ago we proposed a system that would require raw data to be held in a private database. The widespread support for privately owned data was dampened by concerns among states and industry about sharing a single database. And we worried about gridlock. But APHIS did not throw in the towel; instead our staff went back and we started to work to determine how we could move forward in a way that addressed the concern.

APHIS came back with this proposal as a means to allow for multiple private databases that could own the data while providing USDA with a portal that we will need at times to access information.

Under this proposal you the industry would continue to own and have control over the animal movement data. But through agreements established between private entities and the USDA we would be able to access those pieces of information that are necessary in the event that we would need to do something like complete an investigation.

Organizations that wish to consolidate their tracking data can still do so and in fact are encouraged to do so. But this system provides the flexibility that so many have requested and I might add allows for a robust private sector.

But we've also been asked whether this system will slow the pace at which we enter into agreements with the private sector to access their information. The system will not slow that pace because it does not need to be operational before we enter into the agreements.

Now the first step is to develop criteria for the agreements. We're working on that. Our goal is to soon have the first draft of that criteria posted. And we're going to invite your comment. Once we finalize the criteria we will move forward with agreements at the same time that we are implementing the system.

Some have asked how much money we have dedicated to animal ID since this was kicked off, and today I can report to you that nearly \$100 million in funding and resources have been dedicated to this effort. More than two-thirds of that has come from the USDA. I can also tell you that our commitment to the effort continues. I will not preview and really I can't preview the President's budget; it's his budget and he'll release it next week. But that funding information will be available on Monday.

Much of what has been spent has gone out to states under cooperative agreements to implement their own animal identification system. We believe that money has been well-spent. The industry and states have learned and provided USDA with information about what works, what doesn't work.

Finally, some simply want to know why we are putting so much effort in animal ID. It's a subject that brings debate. It would be a crucial tool in safeguarding the health of agricultural animals from disease. One only need look though to other parts of the world, to Australia or other countries to understand another reason why it's important -- and I think you understand this. My friends, they are aggressively marketing, aggressively marketing their animal traceability to gain whatever competitive advantage that they can gain.

Now I know this industry understands the importance of exports. A national animal identification system is needed to protect this crucial source of income and protect your future. I hope that helps to clear some of the questions that maybe have circulated through this conference. With NCBA's continued leadership on this issue and our partnership with other groups we believe that this has every opportunity to be a win/win situation for the industry and for the American consumer.