



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on February 9, 2010

Animal Tracking: Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

The Obama administration is shifting some responsibility for its animal disease tracking system to the states. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack announced Friday his agency will develop a "flexible" system to trace livestock across state lines by requiring farmers and ranchers to participate in state tracking programs overseen by USDA.



The move comes in response to complaints about the [system implemented](#) under the Bush administration in December 2003, when the first U.S. case of mad cow disease was discovered. Its stated [purpose](#) is "disease surveillance, eradication, and control," and two of its cornerstones are Farm Premises Identification (FPI) the National Animal Identification System (NAIS). Both of these programs were instituted as voluntary but intended to become mandatory over time.

The program has run into problems from the beginning since farmers are reluctant to opt in. Groups like the Arkansas Animal Producers Association (ARAPA) were founded specifically in opposition to the federal animal disease traceability programs.

In a [letter to the U.S. Senate Agriculture Committee](#), ARAPA described FPI as coercive, forcing even small farmers to accept USDA jurisdiction over their operations. It said once the program became mandatory, as many as 85 percent of small Arkansas farmers would be forced to abandon operations due to skyrocketing costs and increased bureaucratic paperwork. The economic impact of FPI and NAIS would be exacerbated by the fact more meat would have to be imported, increasing the possibility of introducing foreign diseases and making the U.S. more dependent on other nations for its food supply.

ARAPA maintains the restrictions would make recreational animal use practically impossible and could even violate the religious freedoms of Americans whose beliefs were incompatible with USDA guidelines regarding electronic surveillance implants. Microchips are also linked to increased risk of infection and disease. ARAPA says similar systems in England, Canada, and Australia have been proved to be ineffective. It also points out that states already have effective and inexpensive animal disease tracking systems that do not need federal intervention.

As a result of constituent pressure, Congress cut funding for NAIS by more than half in this year's [agriculture appropriations bill](#), but it still allowed more than \$7 million for the program.

The new rules announced Friday make [moderate changes](#) to the Bush administration plan while allowing USDA to maintain its assumed jurisdiction over animal tracking. The new rules only apply to



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animals moving in interstate commerce, and current state systems will replace NAIS plans. But farmers moving livestock across state lines will have to be registered in a mandatory system. The new rules also increase the USDA labyrinth, establishing a Secretary's Advisory Committee on Animal Health.

The announcement has generated both positive and negative response. [Agweek](#) quoted Bill Bullard, CEO of Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund-United Stockgrowers of America, expressing relief the USDA will revert to proven systems already in place and said it shows USDA has "shifted away from the international marketing goal to the more legitimate goal of controlling diseases."

The Consumer Federation of America welcomes the USDA decision to relax requirements, but it issued concerns in a press release. "A state-by-state approach ... will be a difficult system to implement and administer effectively. It is unclear how differing state approaches and uses of varied technologies can be effectively linked together into an integrated system."

[American Meat Institute](#) President Patrick J. Boyle is even less enthused. "We are extremely disappointed by the failure to implement the National Animal Identification System that has been in development and by the prospect of waiting additional years before the U.S. has an effective animal identification system in place," he said.

Boyle vowed to continue working to implement a mandatory animal identification system.

Photo of U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack: AP Images



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