

## **Livestock Identification: The Challenge Before Us**

*By Nancy J. Robinson  
Chairperson, LCI Livestock Identification Committee  
and Symposium Planning Committee  
and  
Associate Manager, Government and Industry Affairs  
Livestock Marketing Association*

The need is there, the technology is largely there, and the human resources for implementation are there. So why do we still find ourselves struggling to make livestock identification work in this country on a national scale? Ladies and gentlemen, that is why we are here--to answer that question. However, if you are concerned that we are here to simply replot old ground, forget it! This Symposium is all about moving forward, making progress, getting results and most importantly facing head on the "challenges before us" in livestock identification.

The sense of being stuck in a livestock ID time warp particularly struck home recently when I came across the following mission statement from another meeting. "To evaluate current and potential identification procedures of various species and recommend options that will lead to increasing the percentage of animals uniquely identified, with immediate emphasis on identification in such a way to permit tracing from farm through slaughter, along with an aim towards standardization." Sound familiar? Well, it should. This mission statement from the 1988 LCI International ID Symposium mirrors in intent, if not in exact words, the mission statement of this symposium.

The status quo on livestock ID however is no longer acceptable. None of us, whether we represent the producer, a regulatory agency, the research community, an ID manufacturer, veterinarians or the consuming public can afford to return to virtually the same objectives and unresolved issues year after year. The demands for workable, cost-effective, technologically advanced systems of livestock ID are too great on too many levels for that.

Producers today are demanding that ID move beyond the single purpose of proving ownership. The modern production facility is looking for better ways to manage their herds and the information that is generated on the genetics, health and feed efficiency of each animal. Also, today's farmer/rancher is not just interested in total number of pounds produced but the quality, consistency and safety of his product as well. Thus, whether the identification involves an electronic chip, a back tag, a bar coded ear tag or some other ID device, it must meet current producer demands for data management, quality assurance, accountability, food safety, production efficiency, ownership and production management. Responding to the demands of just this one sector of the livestock industry alone would seem nearly impossible; but it can and is being done. And, we will learn more of how that is happening throughout the day from the other speakers.

Demands by the marketing sector are different from other sectors of the livestock industry in that they are more a matter of process than result. Markets were once the first point of concentration for much of the nation's livestock. As such, ID was applied at the market to establish ownership and assure payment to the right entity. Later these ownership records became equally important in regulatory efforts to traceback animals with violative chemical residues and harmful diseases. The market's principal interests therefore most often centers around such issues as who should apply the ID, who pays if application is at the market, maintaining the confidentiality of business records in protecting the market's customer base and uniformity or standardization of ID devices or systems, etc.

As we move on through the marketing chain to the slaughter plant, a whole new set of demands arise. Packers need to be able to readily retrieve the information from the ID but also from the device itself. Also sophisticated inventory control systems within the modern slaughter plant will require compatible ID information systems. The increasing demand for an exchange of information between packers and producers' on the quality, consistency and yield of their animals will require electronic ID systems capable of passing information backwards and forwards through the production and marketing chains. But the greatest driving force today for strong, viable national ID systems from the packers perspective has to be consumer concerns for the safety of the nation's meat and poultry supply and the industry's ability to traceback problems to their source.

Greater and greater demands are being placed on the federal government to develop programs from production to slaughter to reduce, control and/or eliminate deadly pathogens found in food animals. And, these microbiological demands are on top of those they must already respond to in the control and elimination of chemical residues and animal diseases. Increasingly popular with the regulatory community is the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point or HACCP concept. This quality assurance principle revolves around the ability of each link in the food chain to minimize the risk of contamination of meat and poultry products at critical stages in the production, marketing and slaughter of the animal. A failure at any critical control point will require an ability to trace that animal or product back through the chain to determine what went wrong and what must be done to fix it. National livestock ID systems must be in place for us to do that.

On the international front, as other countries incorporate national ID systems into their animal health and food safety programs, we can expect greater demands on the United States to meet similar standards. Likewise, mandated traceback systems in the United States can be expected to place equal demands on countries exporting meat and poultry products to our country. As trade around the world becomes more open and our meat export markets further expand, we will want to assure our trading partners that they are getting wholesome, quality products. The best way to do that is to have the necessary controls in place to identify production and manufacturing problems before we export them abroad. Thus, it stands to reason that one of the most critical controls in such a system has to be the identification of the animals for traceback to the problem's source.

All the elements are clearly in place for moving ahead with national systems of livestock identification: consumer and regulatory demands, producer and marketing demands, and technological and international demands. Unfortunately, many of the barriers that have stopped or slowed us before in

responding to these demands are still with us. See if some of these barriers or concerns, if you will, sound familiar. The ID device costs too much for it to be widely used. Mandatory systems discourage compliance. A national system would be too inflexible. Advancement of livestock ID puts my operation at a competitive disadvantage. The regulators are standing in our way. This information is proprietary and must be closely guarded. Only the government should maintain and control the information. Only the private sector should maintain and control the information. Unique ID numbers for each animal produced in this country won't work and so forth and so on.

We have two choices as we begin our work here today. We can allow our old fears, doubts and nay saying to stand in the way of real progress in responding to the varied and numerous demands for national livestock ID systems. Or, we can begin to build a framework for action.

The time for positive action on livestock identification in my view has never been so critical or so right as it is today, this month, in this year. Your participation in this meeting indicates to me a sincere desire by each of you to end years of debate and to take action toward establishing national systems of livestock identification that work for your farm or ranch, your market, your packing plant, your regulatory agency, your company and your customers. On behalf of my colleagues on the Symposium Planning Committee and the LCI staff, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your participation and your commitment to progress. In turn, we promise you an exciting, informational, controversial and challenging meeting.