

# Information for Animal Identification Systems

*By Harless A. McDaniel, DVM, PhD  
AVID*

First, we want to say "thank you" to LCI and Nancy Robinson for sponsoring this symposium. We all benefit when we share knowledge and plan together.

The primary objective of this talk is to express caution that the animal identification system or network being developed for our food animal industries will project too much of a negative image. We all recognize that certain requirements will have to be met. I believe some upscale image enhancing features should also be built into the system at this stage. This will help market animals and products, especially in foreign markets.

There are three situations, or forces, that seem to be having a major role in shaping this database and the supporting infrastructure.

1. Humane interest aligned with animal rights activists who don't eat red meat, etc. The image that some people have, especially foreign interest, is that the U.S. food animal production is so big, so automated and so complex that computer programs are absolutely essential to manage them. The thought that animal owners care about how their animals are treated seems to have been lost. Others apparently believe our food animals are loaded with antibiotics and other antimicrobial drugs and production enhancing hormones. Some seem to believe that meat from the U.S. is not as healthy or tasty as it is from other areas of the world. A full page ad recently appeared in both of the Washington, D.C. newspapers protesting calves being hot iron branded.

Implanted identification as a substitute for branding would greatly improve the image of our beef industries. Implanted microchips are far more humane than branding. Branding is very painful, whether it is done by hot iron, freezing or applying chemicals. In order to produce satisfactory branding, a certain amount of tissue

must be destroyed and the pain is directly related to the amount of tissue destroyed, not to the means of destroying the tissue. Also, branding greatly reduces the value of the hide and likely reduces the rate of gain more than the implants would. Transponders can electronically relate to information in a database. In conclusion, when implanted identification is compared to branding, or implants are the over whelming winner.

2. The second negative force that appears to be shaping this embryonating information system is the pathogen reduction legislation, introduced into both the House of Representatives and the Senate which did not pass. However, if you take the cover pages off, and change some of the congressional sounding words to plain English, you have a plan for implementing HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point).

There is much interest in implementing this quality control system throughout all U.S. food production and processing.

Under livestock trace-back, we find the following intimidating words, "The Secretary shall, as the Secretary deems necessary, prescribe by regulation that cattle, sheep, swine, goats, horses, mules, and other equines presented for slaughter for human food purposes, be identified in the manner prescribed by the Secretary to enable the Secretary to trace each animal to any premise at which it has been held for such period prior to slaughter that the Secretary deems necessary. The Secretary may prohibit or restrict entry into any slaughtering establishment inspected under this act of any cattle, sheep, swine, goats, horses, mules, or other equines not identified, as prescribed by the Secretary."

The image that things are so bad the Secretary must take this drastic action needs to be softened. Does the public believe that meat is so bad that this drastic action is necessary to protect consumers from all the bad things they may get from meat? Apparently that is what the Secretary of Agriculture is saying.

To provide some offsetting information, I am suggesting a system could be pro-grammed into the food animal identification database to record and retain all the test-negative data. Otherwise, all the producers and processors will know about is the tests that come back positive. The overwhelming majority of the tests will very likely be negative. Why not preserve and use this data to show "How good animal products are?"

3. NAFTA and GATT Regulations-Will the rest of the world see this as a way to market U.S. animals and products in areas where they had previously been excluded because of inferior quality? If that is what the foreign consumer believes, it will not do much good to get meat into their markets because they will not buy it. Any system used to certify the disease status of our food animals, or any participating country, must be science based, transparent and must not arbitrarily or unjustifiably discriminate between like goods where identical or similar conditions prevail.

Traditionally, we only supply the minimal amount of information about diseases and residues required by the importing country. With a database on each shipment of animals and products, we could also readily enhance the image by including all the undesirable components which are not present.

I am not arguing about the need for pathogen reduction legislation or the need to comply with World Trade Organization requirements. I am only pointing out the fact that these three situations exist, and at times they appear to be casting a negative image of our food animal industries. I am asking you to seriously consider adding some components to project a positive image of this industry. You are the experts at selling your commodities. Why not build into the information system the data you need to market your commodities?

Perhaps cow/calf operators might like to know when the calves they produce reached market and how much they weighed. Maybe those producing special genetic stock might want to include a system that would be helpful in evaluating the offspring of certain males, females or crosses.

We at AVID will be happy to discuss these positive image enhancing components, or any other feature, and suggest ways to include them in the database and system. At this preplanning stage, you should be able to build-in almost anything you want. However, after the system is developed it will be more difficult and expensive to add to them.