

R-CALF: APHIS claim of consensus on animal ID a sham

R-CALF contends a USDA report purporting industry consensus for expanding its animal identification program is tilted to favor private companies, primarily ear-tag companies, that stand to reap financial gains.

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R-CALF USA CEO Bill Bullard. R-CALF contends a USDA report purporting industry consensus for expanding its animal identification program is tilted to favor private companies, primarily ear-tag companies, that stand to reap financial gains.

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R-CALF USA has filed a complaint with USDA accusing its Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service of falsifying the outcomes of meetings and public comments on expanding mandatory animal identification under the animal disease traceability program.

At issue is APHIS' summary report on feedback from the cattle industry on its strategy to require the exclusive use of electronic devices for individual animal identification and to expand those requirements to cattle under the age of 18 months.

In the report, APHIS claims there was consensus in the industry to move ahead with both, although "nothing could be further from the truth," said Bill Bullard, R-CALF CEO.

He said there was adamant opposition at the meetings and in public comment. APHIS's report is a falsification of the genuine concerns that many producers expressed, he said.

"The report really constitutes government propaganda," he said.

He claimed it's a "cheerleading piece" to say there's consensus in the industry when there's nothing of the sort.

That feedback document is critical because USDA said it would be used as a basis for next-step recommendations on whether or not the government should proceed with expanding mandatory animal ID requirements, he said.

In the complaint, R-CALF contends the report is tilted to favor private companies, primarily ear-tag companies, that stand to reap financial gains if APHIS expands its animal ID program.

The current animal disease traceability rule requires cattle over the age of 18 months to be identified with some type of official ear tag if the animal enters interstate commerce.

APHIS was seeking comment on expanding that to animals under the age of 18 months and requiring the exclusive use of electronic devices.

There are problems with those strategies, he said.

The first is that current premiums for providing that value-added information on younger cattle will evaporate if animal ID is required throughout the entire system.

"It would be a free gift to the packers at the expense of producers who will incur all the cost of the devices and recordkeeping necessary to achieve traceability from birth to packer" through a national data base, he said.

Feeder cattle are typically slaughtered before they reach the age of 18 months. But they are all traceable through a paper trail, whether it's through health certificates that following them when they cross state lines or bills of sale that following them through intrastate movement, as well as brand records in the West, he said.

Tracking them through a national data base is a marketing issue that holds value for the packer, who can advertise that his product is immediately and fully traceable through a mandatory national system, he said.

Packers are currently willing to pay a premium to producers for that value, but that would disappear if mandatory ID under 18 months were required, he said.

The other issue is that the government has provided no justification for needing electronic identification. Traceability with metallic ear tags is working well, and the government hasn't proved that mandatory technology is needed to achieve disease traceability, he said.

R-CALF's Data Quality Act complaint asks that the APHIS report and any subsequent reports based on it be withdrawn pending the initiation of a new analysis that meets federal standards.

APHIS is reviewing and considering the complaint and will respond directly to R-CALF, said Joelle Hayden, USDA-APHIS public affairs specialist.

"When we established the traceability framework, we determined that it was a basic outline only and would need to be adjusted in the future to allow us to best improve our capabilities," she said.

In support of that commitment, APHIS held a series of listening sessions this summer to hear from all sectors of the cattle industry about how the initial framework is going, she said.

"There are many different viewpoints on this topic, and we appreciate hearing from our stakeholders. We will use all the feedback we've gathered to help us determine next steps for our traceability efforts," she said.

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