



# Government Food Safety System a Sham

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Located south of the tiny town of Tarpley, Texas, Debbie Davis's Seco Valley Ranch is something of a model farm. On her 1,800-acre spread, Davis grazes 225 longhorn cattle, every one of which she closely monitors so that she can better manage the herd and its health. Davis' meat is prized in the supermarkets of Austin and San Antonio, where her grass-fed, pastured beef sells for a premium. In many ways, Davis is the very ideal of a local entrepreneur -- profitable and secure, succeeding on her own terms.

Which is why it angers Davis so much when she considers the government's plans to institute a "National Animal Identification System" that will give a 15-digit tracking number to every cow, chicken, pig, turkey, goat, sheep and horse in the United States to trace animals' every move from birth until slaughter. The federal government and large meat producers are promoting the ID system -- usually referred to by its acronym, "NAIS" -- as a way to better control animal disease outbreaks. But the plan has small and organic ranchers in an uproar. They complain that the animal tracking system will place an undue burden on their operations, giving the biggest meat producers additional economic advantages in an already highly consolidated industry.

"It really does feel like Big Brother," rancher Davis said in a recent interview. "The proposal is that I report every animal I have, every time an animal is born, every time an animal dies, and every time I move an animal from my property. ... There's a lot of expense for everyone. The ones who are going to get impacted are the little guys."

If you're a typical American consumer -- for whom meat usually means supermarket "pink in plastic wrap," not animals out on the range -- then why should you care? Because, say critics of the government's plan, the national livestock tracking system will do nothing to actually prevent animal sicknesses such as mad cow disease or avian flu. According to smaller farmers and sustainable agriculture advocates, the complicated and expensive government proposal is mostly a marketing gimmick. They say the program is simply a way for the largest food corporations to sell more products overseas without addressing some of the key weaknesses in the U.S. food system.

Since the first confirmed case of mad cow disease in 2003, U.S. beef producers have struggled to sell their products abroad. Pork producers fear that a similar market closure could one day hit them if there were an outbreak of, say, swine fever or hoof and mouth disease. The creation of an animal tracking ID system is largely intended, then, to give foreign importers some piece of mind by establishing a way to quickly trace back diseased animals to their source and quarantine that specific herd, while letting the rest of the industry go about business as usual. But the program conspicuously does nothing to address the root causes of livestock disease -- improper diet and a confinement system that encourages epidemics. Instead, say small producers, the proposed plan will simply drop unnecessary costs onto those farmers who are already using best practices.

"I believe big business is behind it," Davis said. "It's a way for the giant, monopoly beef industry to export more meat. The whole thing about tracking disease is a bunch of BS to brainwash the general public."

Essentially, taxpayers, ordinary meat-consumers and ranchers are poised to spend tens of millions of dollars on a scheme that will improve the bottom line of the meat packing corporations without improving the health of the animals from which they profit.

To date, much of the controversy surrounding the national animal tracking system has hinged on whether the program will be mandatory or voluntary for farmers. At first, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said that the program would be compulsory for all livestock. A year ago the USDA announced that it wanted all farmers and ranchers to register their premises. The next step was to implant radio tracking devices in all cattle and to assign tracking numbers to groups of hogs and chickens, which are usually raised by lot. By 2009, according to the plan, all livestock in the United States would be tagged, and a tracking database would be in place.

Then farmers and ranchers pushed back. They complained that the system was too complicated, too costly, and, essentially, unnecessary. Websites and email listserves opposing the ID system proliferated. Protest letters flooded the USDA offices. In *Acres USA* -- one of the most influential newsletters for the organic farming community -- one Texas rancher wrote: "It appears that the ... unstated reason behind [the program] is to get rid of those independent farmers, ranchers and homesteaders."

Confronted with this grassroots opposition, the USDA backpedaled. The agency now says that the animal tracking program will be voluntary.

"People can decide whether they want to participate and whether it fits their needs," Ben Kaczmarek, a spokesman for the USDA, told AlterNet. "We have decided to make the system voluntary at the federal level because of responses we were getting from producers and farmers."

Many farmers, however, remain worried. They point out that three states -- Michigan, Wisconsin and Indiana -- are mandating some or all elements of the animal tracking system; a fourth, Texas, is on the verge of making similar legal requirements. Farmers opposed to the program say that the USDA is quietly -- but firmly -- urging states to make the plan mandatory by dangling extra federal funding as an incentive.

"The USDA is trying to get states to make it mandatory at the state level," Walter Jeffries, a Vermont hog farmer who is a leading anti-NAIS activist, wrote in a recent email. "Thus it is still aimed to be mandatory. Not good. ... NAIS is fundamentally designed to favor the large producers and burden the small producers. This is probably primarily by accident, but the effect will kill small producers and homesteaders off. Our country will lose the ability to produce food other than in the large factory farms."

Missouri farmer Doreen Hannes agrees. She says that while large producers can use their economies of scale to absorb the new regulations, the extra time demanded by the tracking will be unworkable for small farmers. She also worries that the cost of ID tags -- at least \$3 per unit -- and scanners to read the tags will be prohibitively expensive for smaller operations.

"It's just going to add overhead, and add overhead, and add paperwork," Hannes said. "It will be like doing your taxes every week. They [small ranchers] aren't going to put up with this. They will just get out."

The result, Hannes says, will be more concentration in an industry already dominated by giant agribusiness corporations. For example, just four companies control 83 percent of the beef packing industry and 64 percent of the pork packing business, according to a William Heffernan, a researcher at the University of Missouri.

"If you eat, you need to be concerned about this program," Hannes said. "NAIS will bring about absolute consolidation of our meat supply. And these big corporations are pushing for it."

Indeed. The National Beef Cattlemen's Association and the National Pork Producers Council have been among the primary drivers of an animal tracking system. They say a livestock ID database is necessary to maintain access to profitable international markets that doubt the safety of the U.S. meat supply. The loss of several overseas markets after an outbreak of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, in 2003 still looms over the U.S. meat industry. When it comes to small farmers' complaints that the NAIS is all about maintaining a globalized food system that prioritizes exports over local food production, industry representatives and government officials essentially agree.

"Our trading partners will feel more confident if we have a system of rapid trace back, then we can keep our markets open," Dave Warner, a spokesman for the National Pork Producers Council, said. "You've seen what happened with the cattle industry with BSE. That happened in one cow, and Japan and South Korea closed their markets. It took them forever to deal with that."

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns has been even more explicit about how the program is driven by international trade concerns. "You don't ever want to put this massive economic system at risk," he told a gathering of meat industry executives in a speech last August. "I've been asked why we've been putting so much effort into the animal ID system. At its core, the system is a critical tool in safeguarding the health of agricultural animals from disease. When it comes to an outbreak, time is money."

But opponents of the plan point out that the tracking system does nothing to prevent animal disease. Rather, it's about controlling disease outbreaks after they've already occurred -- identifying and quarantining certain areas, while keeping the rest of the meat industry running. The tracking system, then, is a way for meat corporations to sell more beef, pork and chicken abroad, without really addressing the root causes of animal disease -- confinement, massive overcrowding, improper feeding, and poor care.

"ID systems only solve sort of the marketing problem," Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation said. "An ID system does not address the causes. What are the fundamental issues we need to address to solve the disease problems? They are feed, confinement, overuse of antibiotics."

As farmer and agrarian essayist Wendell Berry has said: In trying to solve one problem, the industrial food system often creates another. In this case, building a complex and costly system that will only add to farmers' burdens.

So what would be a simpler solution? Veterinarians agree that the best way to avoid animal diseases is to raise animals in ways that mimic their natural predilections -- give them fresh air and sunlight, plenty of space to roam, and food sources (like grass instead of corn, in the case of cattle) that the animals evolved to eat. That is, adopt the kinds of practices currently used by precisely those farmers who say they will be hurt most by the NAIS.

Consumers can help out by supporting local farmers and ranchers. When you go to the farmers market or locally owned butcher and buy meat raised by someone like Walter Jeffries or Doreen Hannes, you are helping promote a food system that is less prone to disease and disruption, and therefore more sustainable and secure. Not only does that allow shoppers to get closer to their farmers, but also to the animal they are about to eat.

"This can be market driven by the consumer," Texas rancher Debbie Davis said. "The consumer, by how he spends his dollars, can dictate that confined animal feeding practices are not sound. If you want to buy free range chicken and pay a dollar more a pound, you are voting with your dollars that this is a more sustainable way of agriculture, instead of putting a chicken in a cage."

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