

In an attempt to encourage the use of RFID tags for the vast majority of the state's livestock, Wisconsin is covering 50 percent of the tags' cost.

By Claire Swedberg

Jan. 31, 2007—In the face of recommendations from the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) (USDA) regarding the identification of livestock, several states have chosen a variety of methods to induce cattle producers to participate in a federal animal-identification program. Only Michigan currently mandates the use of RFID tags to identify cattle, while more than a dozen states have introduced legislation to limit attempts to require the use of RFID for livestock. In Wisconsin, however, livestock producers can take advantage of an incentive program for the purchasing of USDA-approved ISO 11784/11785 passive 134.2 kHz RFID tags. The program is intended to keep the price of the tags close to that of the ear tags previously utilized, consisting of a piece of plastic imprinted with a unique ID number.

The USDA initiated the [National Animal Identification System](#) (NAIS)—a cooperative partnership between state and federal governments and the livestock industry—in 2004 to standardize and expand animal identification programs and practices to all livestock species, including poultry. The NAIS intends to enable animal-health officials to identify all livestock and premises that have had direct contact with a disease of concern, such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), also known as "mad cow disease," which some studies suggest may be linked to Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease in humans.



Robert Fourdraine, WLIC

While the USDA has ruled that the RFID-tagging of livestock should be done on a voluntary basis, each state's programs depend on a region's disease history, the perceived economic risk in not tagging cattle and public opinion on RFID technology. Michigan's mandate requires the RFID-tagging of all cattle by March 2007.

Although the [Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection](#) has no intention of mandating animal identification, it has looked to its neighbor, Michigan—and that state's incentive program of a 50 percent payment for tags—for a way to help ameliorate the cost to farmers while still ensuring that the majority of livestock are tagged. Approximately 1.2 million head of dairy cattle and a slightly smaller number of beef cattle live on 14,000 Wisconsin farms. A large percentage of the state economy is reliant on safeguarding the health of those cattle, says Robert Fourdraine, chief operating officer at the [Wisconsin Livestock Identification Consortium](#) (WLIC), a nonprofit group formed to represent the interests of livestock farmers.

Wisconsin's Department of Agriculture is reimbursing 50 percent of the cost of approved RFID tags, up to \$1.00 per animal, on a first-come, first-served basis. The program was introduced by the WLIC in late 2006 with an initial 25 percent reimbursement of Department of Agriculture funding. The department opted to double the reimbursement this month.

Fourdraine says the WLIC has conducted RFID pilot programs in the past and has recently been examining the obstacles that keep livestock farmers from buying RFID tags. "A lot of farmers already buy herd-management tags," he says. Such tags, which amount to a flat plastic tag with a unique ID number printed on it, average \$1 to \$1.65 each, he says, whereas RFID tags cost about a dollar more apiece. By providing 50 percent reimbursement, Fourdraine says, the department can keep the RFID tag cost similar to that of a traditional herd-management tag.

From there, producers can decide individually whether they want to purchase RFID readers and, if so, how to use their RFID capabilities. Or they can simply attach the tags to the animals' ears and continue tracking livestock manually.

"There are people out there who would like to use this for herd management," Fourdraine says. The RFID tagging is a voluntary program, he adds, so "the ones who've signed on are those who really want to do something with [RFID]. We want to give them the ability to start."

The state is also providing a program that pays livestock markets, fairs and processing facilities 80 percent of the cost of RFID interrogators, up to a total of \$20,000. That funding is available until Sept. 31, 2007, Fourdraine states, unless the money runs out earlier.

In the past two months, Wisconsin has shared in the cost of tags for about 20,000 animals. Prior to that, explains Fourdraine, "through our pilot projects, we issued about 45,000 RFID tags in the state. In addition, there are six locations, to my knowledge, that have RFID readers in this state, and we have signed up six more through our cost-share program."

As of March, Michigan farmers who take their cattle to market will be required to have their cattle tagged with RFID. The state has suffered outbreaks of tuberculosis in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula, says Kevin Kirk, special assistant to the state veterinarian, prompting the RFID mandate. Michigan operated an incentive program last year to pay 50 percent of tag costs, alleviating the added expense of using RFID. However, Kirk points out, that program has since ended. Thus far, he says, 8,000 of the state's 15,000 total cattle farmers have purchased RFID tags. Some animals will not be tagged until the farmers take them to market, Kirk notes.

To date, Michigan cattle producers have purchased 775,000 tags. "The majority are just putting tags on and not worrying about tracking," says Kirk. "The more creative farmers are using it to monitor things such as a calf's growth." Farmers with questions about how they can use the RFID system, he adds, "can call us—we share that with them." According to Kirk, interrogators have been installed at auction markets throughout the state to begin automated tracking at that point, if farmers have not been using the RFID component of their tags. "We're trying to keep it as simple as possible."

Not only do other states have no incentive programs, but in some cases they are introducing legislation to limit attempts to require the use of RFID tags for livestock. So far, at least 17 states have passed

legislation limiting the mandatory use of RFID. In California, there is no such legislation. Victor Velez, a research specialist for the [California Department of Agriculture](#), says his organization has participated in several field trials of RFID with both dairy cattle and racehorses. However, he admits, the pilots "got mixed results."

"You have to have a critical mass of participation to make RFID tagging worthwhile," Velez notes. In the meantime, he says, there is still plenty of opposition. "There's still a feel of big government putting farmers out of business. Once you sit down and talk to people, though, they do get more into it."

Wisconsin farmers can go to the [WLIC Web site](#) and download a form, or they can call the consortium's office. The tags must come from USDA-approved distributors and have an animal identification number. Such tags comply with the ISO 11784 standard, which defines how data is structured on the tag, as well as ISO 11785, defining the air-interface protocol.