

## **Pressing small farmers to tag every chick is not the best way to track animal disease and reduce outbreaks of food-borne illness.**

Regular readers of this blog and my [Editor's Note](#) column know that I am a big believer in using radio frequency identification technologies to secure the food chain. But I do acknowledge that opponents of the [U.S. National Animal Identification System \(NAIS\)](#) have some legitimate gripes.

A press release issued yesterday stated that 70 leading food and agricultural groups, including the [Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund \(FTCLDF\)](#), the [National Family Farm Coalition \(NFFC\)](#) and the [Organic Consumers Association \(OCA\)](#) have signed a letter urging U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack to "halt implementation of the National Animal Identification System (NAIS)."

The groups claim the program is "fundamentally flawed" since it does not address food safety, and because it favors vertically integrated food producers—large companies that raise and slaughter their own livestock, then process the meat. These companies can treat all cattle, pigs and chickens raised and moved through product together as one entity for tracking purposes, while small farmers would have to tag every animal.

The groups further claim the system won't help the government respond to outbreaks of diseases and food-borne illnesses, because of how big food producers are treated. I'm not so sure, but the NAIS approach does seem emblematic of why a government-driven initiative is not as good as a public-private partnership.

When the government takes the initiative with proper motives—and I believe the motives here were the legitimate need to protect the public and farmers alike from the effects of outbreaks—legislators are lobbied and asked to amend a bill. Eventually, competing interests lead to something that is neither fish nor fowl, so to speak.

A better approach would be for the government to focus on the biggest potential threats—I doubt that rabbit your daughter receives for Easter will threaten the food supply—and take steps to address them. The [U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\)](#) could purchase the technology from suppliers in large volume, then offer it at the same rate to small farmers, and the agency could set up systems that are drop-dead simple, in order to make reporting as painless as possible.

The key is to track animals as they move through the supply chain. There are consolidation points at which animals from different herds come together, then are dispersed. Tracking animals that came in contact with each other is critical.

If there are issues with the potential spread of disease among animals at vertically integrated producers, those should be addressed. But as it now stands, in the event of an outbreak, all animals moving together through production would need to be destroyed. That seems unavoidable.

## NAIS Shows How Government Takes the Wrong Approach

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It's true that the current plan would not enable the government to track the outbreak of a food-borne illness, because there is no tracking of food after it's processed. That is a bigger issue that needs to be tackled—not just with meat producers, but also with fruit and vegetable growers. The government needs to take a holistic approach that reduces the risks to consumers, and creates efficiencies for producers in the supply chain. And it will take vision—and a private-public partnership—to get that done.

*Mark Roberti is the founder and editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, click on the link below. To read more of Mark's opinions, click [here](#) or click [here](#).*