

Why You Should Oppose the USDA's Mandatory Property and Animal Surveillance Program
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Poultry fanciers and keepers of small flocks are facing a grave threat from a proposed government intrusion into their innocent choice of pastimes and way of life.

For several years, the USDA has been working with the largest-scale animal industry organizations (for example, the National Pork Producers, Monsanto Company, and Cargill Meat) to develop a mandatory "National Animal Identification System" ("NAIS").

However, most small scale livestock producers, people who raise animals for their own food, and people who keep horses or livestock as companion animals do not know about the USDA's plans.

The NAIS will drive small producers out of the market, will make people abandon raising animals for their own food, will invade Americans' personal privacy to a degree never before tolerated, will violate the religious freedom of Americans whose beliefs make it impossible for them to comply, and will erase the last vestiges of animal welfare from the production of animal foods.

The Problem

On April 25, 2005, the USDA released "Draft Program Standards" ("St.") and a "Draft Strategic Plan" ("Plan") concerning the NAIS. If you think the description below sounds too bizarre to be true, please go to usda.gov/nais, read the Standards and Plan, and check the citations.

By January 1, 2008, the NAIS will be mandatory. (Plan, pp. 2, 10, 17.)

Every person who owns even one horse, cow, pig, chicken, sheep, pigeon, or virtually any livestock animal, will be forced to register their home, including owner's name, address, and telephone number, and keyed to Global Positioning System coordinates for satellite monitoring, in a giant federal database under a 7-digit "premises ID number." (St., pp. 3-4, 10-12; Plan, p. 5.)

Every animal will have to be assigned a 15-digit ID number, also to be kept in a giant federal database. The form of ID will most likely be a tag or microchip containing a Radio Frequency Identification Device, designed to be read from a distance. (Plan, p. 10; St., pp. 6, 12, 20, 27-28.) The plan may also include collecting the DNA of every animal and/or a retinal scan of every animal. (Plan, p.13.)

The owner will be required to report: the birthdate of an animal, the application of every animal's ID tag, every time an animal leaves or enters the property, every time an animal loses a tag, every time a tag is replaced, the slaughter or death of an animal, or if any animal is missing. Such events must be reported within 24 hours. (St., pp. 12-13, 17-21.)

Third parties, such as veterinarians, will be required to report "sightings" of animals. (St., p. 25.) In other words, if you call a vet to your property to treat your horse, cow, or any other animal, and the vet finds any animal without the mandatory 15-digit computer-readable ID, the vet may be required to report you.

If you do not comply, the USDA will exercise "enforcement" against you. (St., p. 7; Plan, p. 17.) The USDA has not yet specified the nature of "enforcement," but presumably it will include imposing fines and/or seizing your animals.

There are no exceptions -- under the USDA plan, you will be forced to register and report even if you raise animals only for your own food or keep horses for draft or for transportation.

The Negative Effects

Eradication of Small Farms - People with just a few meat animals or 40-cow dairies are already living on the edge financially. The USDA plan will force many of them to give up farming.

Loss of the True Security of Organic and Local Foods - The NAIS is touted by the USDA and agricorporations as a way to make our food supply "secure" against diseases or terrorism. However, most people instinctively understand that real food security comes from raising food yourself or buying from a local farmer you actually know. The USDA plan will only kill off more local sources of production and further promote the giant industrial methods which cause many food safety and disease problems.

Extreme Damage to Personal Privacy - Legally, livestock animals are a form of personal property. It is unprecedented for the United States government to conduct large-scale computer-aided surveillance of its citizens simply because they own a common type of property. (The only exceptions are registration of motor vehicles and guns, due to their clear inherent dangers - but they are registered at the state level, not by the federal government.) The NAIS would actually subject the owner of a chicken to far more surveillance than the owner of a gun. Surveillance of small-scale livestock owners is like the government subjecting people to surveillance for owning a couch, a TV, a lawnmower. What about non-livestock animals? Will the government next want to register all cats, dogs, and parakeets, and demand the global positioning coordinates of their owners' houses and apartments?

Insult to Animal Welfare - The NAIS is the ultimate objectification of higher, sensitive living creatures, treating individual animals as if they were cans of peas with a bar code.

Many people who raise their own animals or buy from small, local producers do so because they are very troubled by industrial-scale production of chickens, cattle, and pigs. These people will be forced either to sacrifice their personal privacy to government surveillance, or to stop raising their own food by humane standards.

Burden on Religious Freedom - Many adherents of plain (and other) faiths raise their own food animals and use animals in farming and transportation because their beliefs require them to live this way. Such people obviously cannot comply with the USDA's computerized, technology-dependent system. The NAIS will force these people to violate their religious beliefs.

What You Can Do

Small-scale keepers of poultry and other livestock can take action to create an effective movement in opposition to the USDA/agricorporate plan. First, small-scale livestock owners should not participate in any so-called "voluntary" state or federal program to register farms or animals. The USDA is using farmers' supposed willingness to enter a "voluntary" program as a justification for making the program mandatory. (See Plan, "Executive Summary" and pp. 7-8.)

Small farmers and livestock owners can also help inform and organize others. The USDA presently does not plan to finalize its rules for mandatory ID until the summer of 2006. There is still time to oppose this plan.

Several farmers and other concerned citizens have joined together to form FARM for LIFE™, a public-interest organization to support the rights of small and subsistence farmers and consumers of organic, natural, and local foods. FARM for LIFE's first project is to stop the USDA plan for mandatory animal ID.

The organization will publish a newsletter three times a year (first publication scheduled for November 1, 2005), to inform citizens of developments concerning animal ID and other issues vital to the small farming and natural/organic food communities. Newsletter subscribers will also be sent information at appropriate times on how to contact lawmakers and the USDA to oppose animal ID. In addition, FARM for LIFE™ will coordinate with other existing interest groups to mount an effective campaign against animal ID.

Please help STOP animal ID and support FARM for LIFE™ by subscribing to the newsletter: \$25 Individual Subscription (1 year), \$40 Institutional Subscription (1 year), Please help with an additional donation in any amount. Make your check payable to "Farm for Life" and mail to: Farm for Life, PO Box 501, Canton, New York 13617.