

## **Observations at the International Livestock Identification Association Conference**

### **Pat Rutledge, producer**

The International Livestock Identification Association (ILIA) held a conference at Spruce Meadows July 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> that dealt with livestock traceability on a global platform. From listening to the speakers from around the world they either accidentally or by design made a good case for animal traceability.

The first speaker Dr. Dick, an associate Deputy administrator from the U.S., pointed out that if Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) was presently introduced into five locations in the U.S. it would be five days before an animal would be diagnosed. By that time the animals from those five locations would have spread to 23 states. It would take another four days before they could issue a stop movement on all livestock in the U.S. By then 1.6 million cattle would be infected. The only good news from this particular example is that none reached Canada. Would we have the border closed in time? Like Alberta they are working towards a national traceability system to minimize the effect on the industry should such an event happen. The goal is to be able to trace an animal within seven days, 95% of the time. At the moment the U.S. is a long way off that.

Dr. Martine Dubuc from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) told us they have 7000 employees (the biggest bureaucracy in the country) protecting the Canadian food system now and in the foreseeable future. In her view traceability positions the food system for effective risk management. With the Canadian program we have a fast, targeted response to a disease outbreak, if it were to occur. So the CFIA's goal is to reduce the number of animals that need to be slaughtered and reduce the length of any trade embargos. In her mind we need to have traceability to ensure the country's food safety chain. The CFIA is working on a huge data base to collect information from the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency (CCIA), the Livestock Identification Services (LIS) and other players to provide feedback as needed.

Dr. David Fly from New Mexico indicated that branding is mandatory in that state. So they have a pretty good brand traceability system. It is not perfect as it does not track individual animals. As in Canada brands in the U.S. are not registered nationally so there could be the same brand used in various states. In some cases up to 10% of the animals have multiple brands. He mentioned cattle coming in from Mexico with tags. However, rodeo cattle lose their tags fairly quickly. They move around a lot so have the potential to transmit disease and really are not traceable. They have done some work on eye retinal scans but it is a lot of work to do this type of identification. They have tried electronic-chipped rumen boluses for animal identification but that technology needs work as well. So they will likely use Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags, similar to those used in Canada.

Next we heard from Dr. Alejandro Ramirez from Chihuahua, Mexico, a state that is just south of Texas and New Mexico in the U.S. They have an effective state program in place. This program utilizes metal tags, but the information is stored on line through an organization called SICOMORA. Chihuahua exports a large percentage of their cattle to the U.S. If any disease problems arise the border can be closed quickly. If this happens Mexican cattle are suddenly worth 50% less than they were the day before. There are 61,000 Chihuahua producers with a premise ID. Every animal tag number can be quickly traced through the internet. This program is producer driven and designed mainly for disease trace back.

This was a multispecies conference so we dealt with horses as well. Billy Smith from the U.S. says rodeo/sport horses present a disease challenge in the U.S. and Canada. Some of those animals get to four or five rodeos in a weekend. There is usually minimal health testing and identification is a problem. For example, how many sorrel horses with no markings are there? Many horses do carry a Coggins paper with them but apparently after travelling in the glove box for several weeks they are not that legible. Horse identification is a problem, but it can be part of a program. Microchips are available from the Jockey Club. Many However, many horse owners in the U.S. do not want their horse listed on a national database.

Les Burwash from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) has tried several identification methods for horses. A microchip in the neck worked well enough on quiet horses but the processing plants did not like them because they were hard to recover. Stomach boluses were hard to administer to large horses. They tried the tail but there was not enough muscle tissue to hold the implants. Ear tags actually worked reasonably well on mature horses but young colts usually developed too much infection. They could insert chips under the skin in the poll but there is a lot of bleeding and sometimes the chip will wash out. It takes care to insert the chip and there can be considerable bleeding. So ID for horses is still a work-in-progress.

There is some urgency for horse identification because the European Union (E.U.) has indicated they would not accept animals without RFID and full traceability three years from now. So as an industry we either tag horses or watch their values move to zero as they get older.

Iris scans are possible for horses. Instant DNA maybe possible but the technology is years away. Apparently, the U.S. has put microchips in some ligament. In this case, the chip does not end up in the food chain. In the mean time in Canada after August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010 a four page health declaration (a signed affidavit) listing any treatments a horse has had in the last six months will be required for horse slaughter. This must accompany the horse to the slaughter plant.

Dr. Ted Schroeder from Kansas State University pointed out that producers tend to focus on costs of a program. In reality Cost-Benefit is more realistic.

So what are the benefits? Are markets opened as a result of RFID traceability? Are there trust issues? Would some customers pay more for beef if there were some sort of certification of traceability?

It raised some eyebrows in the U.S. when Canada signed a beef deal with China. What have they got that we do not have? At the moment Kansas imports 80,000 head per week from all over the U.S., Mexico and Canada. How could they hope to trace an individual animal with their present system? In 2004 the U.S. lost about \$3.5 billion as a result of closed borders. Apparently, that works out to about \$9 million per day. The World Organization of Animal Health (OIE) has indicated that we need to have world wide traceability. It's the new global standard. Three reasons: trust, animal health and zoonotics (transfer of disease from animals to people)

Dr. Jill Hobbs, University of Saskatchewan presented her ideas about animal traceability. When food retailers are held responsible for health outbreaks they begin to make demands down the supply chain. So the new buzz is identification – traceability – verification. Traceability may lead to increased competitiveness and lead to increased marketability. When looked at as private good versus public good there may be an argument for public funding for some of the extra costs.

Glenn Brand with Beef Information Centre (BIC) presented his ideas about traceability and food safety. In North America animal traceability does not rank high as a consumer concern: only 3 to 4% of people surveyed believed it was important. Food safety ranks about ten times higher. So unless consumers connect food safety with traceability it is not an issue in Canada or the U.S. And this may be part of the problem in the field: defining what animal traceability is.

Jose Luis Bretones, Director of Global Supply for MacDonald's. They serve 2.5 million hamburgers in Canada and 60 million in the U.S. per day. Customer trust is important for their business. MacDonald's needs to meet customer expectations each and every time they serve a meal. They use 1.6 billion pounds of beef and 1.3 billion pounds of chicken per year plus 3.1 billion pounds of potatoes and yet do not drive the industry. The E.U. is running out of beef but they are still fussy about imported product. MacDonald's needs to have product safety at competitive, predictable prices for their business. For them it is not necessarily the lowest price that is important but predictable prices together with value and quality. Also they try to be as local as possible when sourcing ingredients but need to be flexible in case of sourcing emergencies. Russia and China do not have enough animals to supply MacDonald's markets in those regions.

Brazil has a small number of large companies that are gaining huge markets through consolidation. This will change the industry for MacDonalD's in the near future. The company has just recently appointed a nutrition officer and a sustainability officer. They now spend a considerable amount of time on animal welfare issues (the trust factor).

One of Jose's traceability examples dealt with a Japanese supermarket trip. His companion pulled out his cell phone and scanned the barcode on a fish product. There was immediate information about where the fish was caught, which boat was used, the boat captain's name and something about captain's family.

Japan is not the only country that requires this kind of traceability. As an exporter looking for maintaining existing business and expanding sales Canadian industry and companies will need to provide those customers with products and programs that they want to have. It is as simple as that.

Gordon Cove, Alberta Livestock Marketing Agency (ALMA). Some customers are willing to pay extra for a guarantee of tenderness. Goldfinch Canada is doing some hyperspectral testing to identify tender animals.

Garry Edwards, Australia. Why do traceability? Market Access, maintain price competition, domestic food safety, disease traceability and income profitability. For example, Australia would lose \$10 million per month if their border were closed to beef exports. Premise ID is necessary to have a traceability program. Electronic ID is more efficient than other methods but tough performance standards are required to make a program successful. According to Edwards to be effective tags should be able to be read as animals run up a chute. No exemptions. Also, a national database with data integrity is an important component of any program. The system also needs to operate at the speed of commerce. A standardized platform is required for an effective program.

What about program delivery? Edwards suggested that a private program is preferred to a government run operation. Governments are good at developing regulations but are not good at running businesses.

In addition, the program should be linked to the present tracking system such as brands. Set the bar high and let people meet expectations, do not keep lowering the bar. Shift the focus to cost-benefit, not cost alone. Need to be able to scan at the speed of commerce and have the ability to correct errors quickly. In the Australian program 1000 records can be sent in a period from 30 seconds to a minute.

Brent McEwan Deputy Minister ARD. Premise ID and animal ID are required to have a traceability system. From his perspective the government brought in traceability to speed up commerce. For example, if importer countries closed their borders to trade the traceability system would minimize the time that the border might be closed; if

would also minimize the number of animals that would have to be eliminated in case of a disease outbreak. Another area of support for the system might be useful in case of an environmental disaster where animals need to be located quickly. This, however, might be reaching a bit.

All-in-all this was an interesting conference and the organizers should be congratulated.