

Blessed are the Tagmakers....

by Cynthia Sharpe

This is a reprint of an article that appeared in the Jan-Feb 2006 issue of Home Dairy News, and then in issue #26 of CreamLine. Cynthia Sharpe is goat farmer who is a regular columnist for the Home Dairy News.

Now is the time to go out and buy stock in animal identification companies, if you are of the stock-buying persuasion. NAIS, or National Animal Identification System is looming on the horizon like a dark swarm of killer bees and all us little livestock magnates are just standing here with big-eyed stares on our faces waiting for death by a hundred stings. At least that's how I feel about it when I let my worst fears get me by the ears.

NAIS is currently a draft plan and strategy whereby every livestock animal in America will be identified and traceable to its farm of origin within 48 hours. Livestock animals are currently defined as cattle and bison, llamas, alpacas, goats, sheep, hogs, poultry, and horses, with provisions pending for rabbits, hatching eggs, crawfish, and farm fish. Large meat producing operations will be allowed to assign a single number for lots of animals that move through the process together, say 100 hogs raised together from weaning to slaughter. Small farmers will have to ID each animal.

Frequently mentioned by NAIS advocates in an effort to calm the rabble, animals that stay on the farm from birth to death without ever leaving will never have to be identified. Now if the pasture gate comes open and the cows take a walk down the road they've technically left the farm. I don't know what happens then.

The supposed purpose for this system is to prevent spread of animal disease, thwart terrorists, and protect the national food supply. If you read Dr. Zanoni's article in the last *CreamLine* you know what a crock that is. Of course big farmers like to point fingers at little farmers and say that's where disease outbreaks come from. I'm liable to slap the next big farmer I hear say that. (*Most come from wild populations -- editor.*)

Hey, what have I got to whine about? I filled out the farm census forms right away, under penalty of law. Well, to be honest, I only threw out the census forms ONCE, then filled them out. But didn't send them in. However, I did send in the third set, and talked convivially with the nice lady from the state who called soon after and wanted to know all about my farm and asked everything but whether the hens laid brown or white eggs.

I signed up for the Scrapie Eradication Program like a good little girl. I was sent information about how the program would help the goat industry by a) protecting goats from a disease they do not get (12 documented cases ever) and b) by letting Those In Authority know how many goat keepers there are out here in the hinterlands thereby giving us more power somewhere, in the halls of Congress maybe? Dairy goat keeping has always been the redheaded stepchild of the livestock industry in the U.S., and the idea of furthering our visibility and maybe attracting some pork for research that would actually benefit us was very attractive.

Somewhere in all that paperwork was a questionnaire which, if my memory serves, included a query that went thusly: do you think more people would participate in the Scrapie Eradication Program if it 1) was voluntary, or 2) was mandatory? Well, because that was pretty much a no-brainer, I like many others I'm sure, said "mandatory". We have all since realized that our responses were used to help make the argument that we support a mandatory program. That's modern big-business government for you.

I guess you can tell I'm a little rankled about all this. But what does that have to do with the price of tea in China? Let's put the kettle on and see.

In order to get an idea of the actual costs of NAIS to my farm, I first looked at the pocketbook end of the equation. Assuming that RFID tags are required by the state I live in--which is a fair possibility given that faith in tattoos is apparently thin in governmental circles---these would be my initial costs if I had to start the program right now.



Tags: The only size RFID tags listed in the Jeffers Catalogue (usually cheapest) are cattle-sized. They cost \$192.50 for 50 tags. I currently have 43 adult goats and 16 new babies with about 30 more does to kid. Estimate: \$385.00 for tags for 2006.

Tag applicator: \$41.95 for the Global Retracto-Matic which applies sheep and goat tags. Also slices tomatoes thinly and neatly.

Tag Reader: Here I have choices. I can get the compact reader which will only tell me the number on the tag for \$199.95. Or I can go big with the "stick" reader which can collect information and export it to a computer for \$535.00. I expect this is what the invasive animal ID government people will be equipped with. I will do well to afford the compact reader.

So far, it will run me about \$626.90 to start. That's if I use the RFID tags, and doesn't count tags for animals I may buy, tags ripped out and needing to be replaced, etc.

If I go with microchips---much less obtrusive and painful for the animals but with issues of their own---the costs are significantly higher. The cheapest microchips I have heard of are \$4 each bought in bulk, roughly twice the price of tags. I haven't researched the price of the microchip reader, but have heard that it can run \$500-5000 depending on features. So conservatively, start-up with chips could run me at least \$1000.

As written, the NAIS draft plan (which can be seen at www.aphis.usda.gov/lpa/issues/nais/nais.html) would require animal movement reporting, including the birth or death of an animal, any animal bought or sold, animals that come to the farm for any purpose and have contact (commingle) with mine, such as does brought to be bred or the neighbors bringing kids to be disbudded or castrated. Also, if a goat got out of the pasture and went to my neighbor's house and munched the forsythia bushes---which has happened a couple of times---that event would have to be reported. Within 24 hours.

Of course if I take goats to a show or livestock sale barn or anywhere that they may "commingle" with other livestock the event must be reported. It's possible that the destination entity will have to make the report, which makes sense (and is already done) for sale barns where we can presume many of the animals are going straight into the human food chain. However it will also mean that taking the adorable baby goats to the nursing home or elementary school class will require a report.

But this doesn't just apply to my goats. My laying chickens will also have to be tagged or banded in some way. According to the NAIS plan, the ID is supposed to be readable from a distance. A chicken leg band is only readable up close, microchips are not particularly palatable when found in the tetrazzini, and it will be pretty danged hard to ear-tag a chicken. Whatever the desk jockeys decide, I'll get to pay for it.

Technically, according to the NAIS plan, if one or more of my chickens goes across the fence and into my neighbor's woods, that would be a reportable event. If the fox snatches a chicken, as she is wont to do in the spring when her kits are fussy, that is a reportable event and the tag/band/chip is supposed to be retired. If the Greek lady in Asheville wants to buy two old hens for making stew for her husband who has cancer, that is a reportable event. Also, the cause of death of any animal is supposed to be determined and reported. So I guess some of my reports would say "Et by fox".

I average selling about 25-30 goats per year, we have an average of 45 kids born annually, I usually have 10-15 does brought for breeding, and I may buy or trade for up to 10. I'm currently leasing 4 does, too. I usually lose about 5 chickens per year---mostly to the fox---and buy 10 replacement chickens. Sometimes I give away a few hens. I used to have guineas, some of which just left of their own accord.

We show goats a couple of times per year and, while I didn't do any this past year, it is typical for us to do 3-5 public presentations with the goats annually. Although I have a vet who comes to the farm, I sometimes take goats to another vet across the state line into Tennessee. I could easily have as many as 100 reportable events in a year. I do not have time for this, do you?

I wonder what to do with the babies. I mean, I usually order chicks and they supposedly will come with a leg band or some form of ID ("Passport, please, Biddy?"). An ID band that would fit a chick would soon be grown out of, and one that would fit an adult chicken would be walked out of by the chick. I frequently sell baby goats at under one month of age to be raised as pets, family milkers, meat stock. Would they have to have an ear tag? The NAIS tag will have to have 15 numbers readable from a distance, which sounds like a sizeable tag to me. Those of you with new kids or lambs look at how thin and delicate those ears are. Tattooing at that age is bad enough, but the idea of tags makes me cringe. And oh, the poor LaManchas!

And finally, there is the issue of the premise ID. Anyplace where even one livestock animal is kept is considered a premise and must have an ID number. This number will also be linked to global positioning satellites (GPS) so that in case they need to, the government animal ID people can find your place lickety-split. My farm is a FARM, with goats and chickens and a cow. My neighbor has one horse he doesn't even ride but he'll have to have a premise ID. Your granny who keeps 5 laying hens and a rooster will have to have a premise ID. My parents have their backyard fenced and we pasture two ancient wethers down there; that will be considered a premise.

Places where animals may commingle on a fairly regular basis will have to have a non-participant premise ID. That includes veterinary offices and possibly feed stores that sell baby chicks. My friend Sherry has wondered aloud that if she took some of her goats shopping and for a sundae every Friday, would the Wal-Mart and DairyBarn have to get premise ID? Oh, and speaking of veterinarians, it looks like they may be required to report animals not carrying approved ID, either at the farm or in the office. That gives you a warm fuzzy feeling, doesn't it?

All this sounds ludicrous, ridiculous, expensive and virtually impossible to enforce. That's because it is. But your tax dollars are going to pay for the USDA and your state department of agriculture to give it the old college try. If you like the sound of all this, blessings upon you. If you don't, do some research. A good place to start is a website called www.nonais.org. By all means, write to your politicians. They're the ones trying to put laws through that will empower this mess. By the way, who is really behind NAIS? The money trail leads to mega agribusiness and the ID manufacturers. Don't believe me; look it up.

What does all this have to do with home dairying? Well, if it is costly enough and aggravating enough people may just give up their animals. There may be less home dairying going on, fewer parents willing to let the children participate in 4-H livestock projects, fewer people in charge of the national food supply.

I think what bothers me most about NAIS is that it is intended to be mandatory, and will therefore eventually infringe on my right to freely farm in a traditional manner. If I felt it was an effective means to protect the public health I might feel differently about it. At best, it's a way to protect the profits and export interests of the industrial farm institution. At worst, it is another subtraction from the basic rights we as Americans are guaranteed in the Constitution. I don't like anything that smacks of totalitarianism, and this surely does. ❖