

Does mandatory animal ID miss the mark?

Burt Rutherford | Jun 26, 2019

The debate over whether or not we need mandatory animal ID in the beef business has gone far too long. It's time to decide. I received a very thought-provoking email from a reader in Wisconsin this week regarding animal identification. You may be weary of reading about that topic in this space, but it's an important issue that, as a business, we must come to grips with. "Supporters of animal ID seem to believe that disease originates from one source, and if cattle from that source are treated or eliminated, there will be no disease. But disease spreads by many methods - most of which are not because of human actions," says Dave Kuhle. "My experience with pseudo-rabies in hogs in the 1970s showed that all the efforts of the USDA, which spent millions of dollars by quarantining, vaccinating, and re-populating, were completely wrong. USDA never stopped, or even controlled, the spread of the disease. There never was a single cause of contagion, but spread by contact, by rodents and fleas and through the air. Producers of infected herds either liquidated or suffered losses until the disease subsided. Pseudo-rabies is still present in the environment, and the disease will eventually mutate and re-occur. The same is true of African swine fever." Kuhle says producers who want to stay in business use best practices to control disease. By this, I presume he means a strong biosecurity program, among other things. "But we do not live in a disease-free world. There is no cure for many diseases, and certainly no way to stop the spread of every disease. I believe those who support mandatory ID have unrealistic expectations about control, and their efforts would be better directed toward educating the public about the reality of nature." Would beef producers be better off by being encouraged to implement a viable biosecurity program rather than kicking the can of mandatory animal ID down the road? It's a good question. Here are my thoughts, for whatever they're worth. First, how about both? Let's continue to work toward a viable animal disease traceability program while encouraging beef producers to protect themselves with biosecurity. Do we need a mandatory animal ID program? Yes, we need a mandatory animal ID program, if we are serious about dealing with a disease outbreak. But that's not really the most important question. First, we must collectively decide if we want a mandatory animal ID program. That's been the crux of the often-emotional debate. BEEF readers fall on both sides of that question, but it's the question we absolutely must answer. Do our current efforts regarding animal ID and disease traceability miss the mark, as Kuhle suggests? I don't know. Many years ago, in the aftermath of the foot-and-mouth outbreak in England, I was fortunate to participate in a number of exercises designed to form a coordinated approach to how the beef business would deal with an outbreak here. Those exercises assumed a single source of infection. How quickly it could spread was startling. But is a single-source beginning of a disease outbreak the general assumption now? Again, I don't know. But in the case of a bioterrorism attack, I think we can assume that a disease agent will be introduced in multiple locations.

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