USDA
United States Department of Agriculture

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

April 2019

Factsheet

Advancing Animal Disease Traceability: A Plan to Achieve Electronic Identification in Cattle and Bison

Animal disease traceability helps animal health officials know where diseased and at-risk animals are, where they've been, and when. This information is essential during a disease outbreak. USDA is currently working to strengthen its traceability system to protect the long-term health, marketability and economic viability of the U.S. livestock industry. Achieving this goal is only possible through continued federal, state and industry collaboration. USDA is committed to keeping our partners informed about our plans and progress as we work together to build the traceability system.

While there are several steps USDA needs to take in order to strengthen its traceability system, the most essential one is to move from metal identification tags to electronic identification tags in beef and dairy cattle, as well as in bison. The electronic tags use radio frequency identification (RFID), which speeds information capture and sharing.

RFID Benefits

The change to RFID will greatly enhance animal health officials' ability to locate specific animals quickly during an outbreak. It might have taken weeks or months to determine which animals need to be tested using paper records, but with electronic identification (ID), it could be as short as a few hours. This helps producers by significantly reducing the number of animals involved in disease investigations. It will also help animal movements from affected areas happen more quickly – while still ensuring no one else receives exposed animals.

Implementing RFID

Beginning January 1, 2023, animals that move interstate and fall into specific categories will need official, individual RFID ear tags. This does not include feeder cattle. Under the current regulations feeder cattle as well as other cattle and bison that move directly to slaughter do not require individual identification.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

USDA understands producers need time to transition to RFID and has worked with the National Assembly of State Animal Health Officials to establish manageable milestones to achieve this goal.

December 31, 2019
USDA will discontinue providing free metal tags. However, approved vendors will still be permitted to produce official metal tags for one additional year. Approved vendor tags will be available for purchase on a State-by-State basis as authorized by each State animal health official through December 31, 2020.

January 1, 2021
USDA will no longer approve vendor production of metal ear tags with the official USDA shield. Accredited veterinarians and/or producers can no longer apply metal ear tags for official identification and must start using only Official RFID tags.

January 1, 2023
RFID ear tags will be required for beef and dairy cattle and bison moving interstate that meet the above requirements. Animals previously tagged with metal ear tags will have to be retagged with RFID ear tags in order to move interstate. Feeder cattle and animals moving directly to slaughter are not subject to RFID requirements.

Animals that will require official, individual RFID tags include:

Beef Cattle & Bison

- sexually intact and 18 months or older
- used for rodeo or recreational events (regardless of age)
- used for shows or exhibitions

Dairy Cattle

- all female dairy cattle
- all male dairy cattle born after March 11, 2013

RFID Ear Tag Specifications

Beginning January 1, 2023, all cattle and bison that are required to have official identification under current regulations must have official RFID ear tags. The tags should be applied at the time of birth or before the animal moves off the farm in interstate commerce.

Tag technology can be low or ultrahigh frequency—whichever the State, producer or industry sector prefers. Tags must be approved by USDA and meet standards for quality and performance, be tamper proof, contain a unique ID, and display the U.S. official ear tag shield. Tags can be part of a matched set with visual identification. RFID tags will be available to replace the orange, metal brucellosis tags.

Transition Support

While electronic identification is critical for modernizing animal disease traceability, USDA understands this represents a big change for the industry and individual producers. Even though implementation of electronic identification is still several years away, USDA is committed to supporting producers as they transition from metal to RFID tags.

USDA will work with State animal health officials to share the cost of official RFID ear tags (instead of the free metal tags currently provided for cattle covered under the current regulation). This will reduce the cost that producers pay for RFID ear tags. USDA and State partners will also provide funding to support electronic readers for markets and accredited veterinarians as a critical component to implementing the electronic system.

As USDA modernizes its tagging system, we will also improve current State and Federal systems for official RFID tag distribution tracking, and record keeping.

Getting Official RFID Ear Tags

A premises identification number (PIN) is required to purchase official ID tags. USDA has a new interactive map that helps direct producers to state-specific resources for obtaining a PIN:
https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/traceability/state-pin/

States will approve and allocate discounted tags, managing the process through the current infrastructure. Accredited veterinarians may continue to inventory and apply official ID tags but must adhere to record keeping requirements.

USDA will maintain a list of approved manufacturers. Accredited veterinarians or producers may purchase official, approved tags directly from tag manufacturers or retailers.

Other Official Identification

Brands and tattoos may still be accepted as official identification if both the shipping and receiving State or Tribal animal health authorities agree to accept the markings in place of RFID.

For More Information

If you have additional questions, please email: traceability@aphis.usda.gov