



Discussion Topic

August 2006

A monthly resource for the Community Action Groups of Michigan Farm Bureau

Animal ID: necessary for food safety or Big Brother butting in?

Early next year, Michigan becomes the first state in the Union to mandate electronic identification tags for all cattle.

Promoted by agriculture officials as a necessary upgrade to already-mandatory animal identification, the electronic tags offer options for technology-savvy producers, who can use their personal digital assistants (PDA) to access information stored in the farm computer simply by entering the tag number or reading it electronically with a "wand reader."

Less tech-driven farmers don't have to use the technology, but can simply use the tags as they use metal tags now - just read the number on the tag and go from there.

Electronic tags have proven to be a good tool for animal ID in Michigan, which has required the new tags in the TB Modified Accredited Zone since 2004 with good results, MDA officials say. Besides, a national electronic ID program is set to begin in 2009, and it will require all farm premises to be identified and all animals, not just cattle, to have electronic ID, so why not get ahead of the game?

Officials also say the program is necessary to protect the nation's food supply. With electronic ID, they say, consumers will be more confident and less likely to panic and stop buying beef or milk if the USDA can trace the contamination to its source within hours, which Michigan has already proven it can do.

Detractors of the plan say we already have a system in place that has worked well for many years, and many object to the cost of \$2 per tag. They also are wary of the dangers of "Big Brother," a phrase that implies that the plan is simply a way for the government to intrude on farmers' privacy and keep track of all farms and all animals.

QUESTIONS

1. Which, in your opinion, is more important: The ability to quickly trace a potentially diseased animal to its source or safeguarding a farm's privacy? Should we have to make the choice?
2. What can your county Farm Bureau do to get the word out and be sure all area producers comply with the electronic ear tag mandate?
3. Michigan will lead the nation in electronic cattle ID because of its pilot program in the TB Modified Accredited Zone. How has the state's TB problem helped move us ahead of the national ID program?