

USDA Poised to push us off our farms with the National Animal Identification System

by Lynn R. Miller

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“Some day,” old Jamie had said, “there will come a reckoning and the country will discover that farmers are more necessary than traveling salesmen, that no nation can exist or have any solidity which ignores the land. But it will cost the country dear. There’ll be hell to pay before they find it out.”

*- from **The Farm** by Louis Bromfield*

We are farmers. We care for the land and for our livestock. It is

our chosen work. And it defines us in glorious ways, but only to ourselves and with others of our persuasion. Not to the wider public, not to the masses of men and women. Not today. Today we are quaint anachronisms as disconnected from their view of the landscape and their forkful of food as the disconnect they feel with self-reliance. For the longest time we have enjoyed the assurance that has come from our own working intimacy with the practical and achievable notions of self-sufficiency. We have enjoyed our freedoms. We could plant most anything we wished. We could parent strains of livestock as we choose. We have been free and not always fully grateful for that freedom. Oft’ times it would take a broadside, a sneak attack, a terrible calamity for us to rise up and realize that the core of who and what we are is deserving of our best efforts at self-preservation. When we feel something or someone tearing at our middle, if it’s not too late, we do rally to save our farms, our farming and ourselves.

With an insidious end run and in the name of food safety (with the war on terrorism thrown in for obscene measure), greedy multi-national corporations devoid of any ethics whatsoever are poised to destroy most that is the rich and valuable tradition of family farming in America. And they intend to do it within a few short months of now. If no substantial public outcry is heard before July of 2006, it will be difficult or impossible for me to have laying hens, for her to have a milk cow, for your daughter to have a pony, for your uncle to keep teams of work horses, for your great aunt to raise those beef cattle, for your brother to raise trout and catfish, for you to maintain a flock of wool sheep. July 2006¹, that’s when the National Animal Identification System is slated to slip past us all and begin to become the most destructive and misguided farm regulation in the entire history of farming.

The United States Department of Agriculture, USDA, has worked for over 65 years to destroy the independent small farm community of this country. They have worked through terrible misdirected policy, deceptive loans and so-called protections/guarantees, insidious propaganda, and horrible complicity with renegade banks and unscrupulous competing agribusiness corporations.

(Within the last few years they duped many of us into believing they were the right institution to write, legislate and enforce organic standards. We have seen and continue to see how, with the help of the biggest agribusiness players, the USDA [formerly our USDA] has succeeded in neutering the organic distinction while granting huge, non-complying, industrial players the opportunity to get stamped as certified.)

They have worked hard to run us off the land but they have not, to this moment, succeeded. In spite of their direct and indirect push to have us *get big or get out*, many free thinking men and women have persevered with their small farm dreams and kept this country alive with exciting new growths in diversity, fertility and productivity. Only recently have the demon doctors of big agriculture finally come up with a plan so devilish that it just might succeed in running us all off the land for good. But I don't think so. They can't help but underestimate us because they have zero respect for, or understanding of, the human spirit.

The United States Dept. of Agriculture, whose original mandate spoke directly to their working to support and protect the small independent family farm, long ago went to the dark side embracing the influences from big corporation board rooms. Today the USDA is in open and public business partnership with the likes of Monsanto and Cargill, two of several authors of the newly proposed National Animal Identification System or NAIS. With this program, if it is finally made into law, we each and every one of us farmers and ranchers, will have to register every single cow, horse, chicken, duck, trout, pig, turkey, ewe, etc. that we own. Not only register them, but have micro-chips implanted in them at our own expense. And to go even further, we'll have to have the livestock premises and our own houses registered and electronically connected to the master federal global positioning system. If that isn't enough, we'll also be required to maintain exhaustive records on each and every animal. This applies if you own one chicken or a thousand sows. (It should come as no surprise that the only entities which seem somewhat spared by this new plan are the largest multi-national confinement livestock operations who will be required only to register the holding facility and not the individual animals.) And those electronically sensitive micro-chips? They are being built and sold by several of the co-authors of this NAIS plan. (See the listing in the second paragraph of page 55 of this issue.)

The USDA, put there originally to protect the food supply and to support the agricultural diversity and productivity of this country, has sold us down the river. They care deeply about you if you are Monsanto, but if you are Joe Jones of Fayetteville they don't give a damn. They care deeply about you if you are a genetic mutation which promises great profitability, but if you are a rare and endangered plant or animal variety they don't give a damn. Well, we don't need the USDA, haven't for quite some time; they are outmoded and completely out of touch with today's reality.

Those of us on the ground, in the barns, in the crop rows, in the corrals, in the pastures, on horseback, sitting on plows with lines in our hands - we know that what we do, that what we are still *allowed* to do, provides a fragile, beautiful and essential web of sustainable life for not just people but for the whole of the living planet as well. We know these are difficult times which require of us that

we maintain our direct immediate connection, which includes inherited knowledge and fully sacred stewardship, with the land, the plants and our animals. For it is in this connection and with these things that all of us will be kept gracefully and graciously alive, healthy, wealthy and critically appreciative.

The USDA has NO sense of any of these things. They have lost all touch with the “culture” part of agriculture. Normally I would say *ignore them, they don't speak for us*. But not now, this time, we must pay attention, careful attention. We still have an opportunity to raise such a ruckus that the architects of this shameful plan just might be run out of town on a genetically modified rail.

But don't take my word for it. Do your own research. Learn all you can and then prove to me that this misguided plan isn't going to hurt each and every one of us, farmer and consumer alike.

And check out the odors here. Why, I ask myself, would Monsanto and Cargill and other corporate farming interests be so insistent on ramming their animal ID program through, one state at a time until it hits the federal level? They say it is because they are concerned about food safety issues and terrorism. When have they ever done anything for the common good? Aren't they always quick to point out that theirs is a profit-oriented path? Think about it. The one corporation who has done more in a quarter century to destroy farmers, genetic diversity, the environment and human dignity, Monsanto, wants this program set up NOW! Why? Because there is money and power in the resulting shift. *And those pesky little farmer pirates will all have to go find town jobs.* If this program becomes law and fact, the government (and/or its private sector subcontractor) will have access to a data base of not only every animal on farms, but of us and our buildings. Information, as they say is power. And that data base would be very powerful indeed. The fox has come up with a way to get a map to every single hen house in the country along with information about the sleeping farmers in the house. That should be enough to send most of us for our muskets.

I am certain that this plan flies in the face of the US Constitution and rattles such rights as the protection against unlawful search and seizure. But let's face it, our judiciary is on an extended lunch break; so if and when the constitutionality of this plan should ever be granted a courtroom audience, no one but the naive expects an honest hearing, let alone a clean reading of the applicable laws. Justice is not only blind, it has of recent become deaf and dumb as well.

Okay, simple talk. Just in case you are still reading and find yourself in complete disbelief, let us project forward and see just how this plan may affect some of us:

You farm with horses (two mares and a gelding - all of which you raised and trained). You also care for a few beef cows, keep a milk cow, three gilts, ten sheep, and raise ducks, chickens, and three goats. Your kids have three ponies they ride. These livestock are an integral part of your life. They help to define you.

Let us look into the future a bit. It's the year 2009 and the National Animal Identification System has become law. You haven't paid much attention to it because you figure it doesn't apply to you. After all, you aren't part of the industrial food machine.

But you have been very wrong. Local agents of the government have learned that you illegally took one of your (unregistered) teams of horses and a wagon to town to haul people in the Easter Parade and you were also identified as the man who traded (unregistered) manure and three (unregistered) ewes to a local small organic farmer. It's a Wednesday and you receive a registered letter from the government informing that you are in violation of the NAIS for 51 infractions (one for each

undocumented animal you own plus one for your undocumented livestock premises and one for your undocumented home) and owe the government a \$500 fine per infraction (\$25,500). You are also notified that a sheriff's marshal will be coming to your farm within two weeks to catalog your livestock and make arrangements for trucking to have them removed to a slaughtering plant where they will all be destroyed². Your work horses, your kid's ponies, your wife's goats and chickens, the cattle, all the livestock to be taken out and shot because you refused to register them?! Shot because the government can't take a chance that you might be harboring disease or some terrible terrorist gene. And the fine print warns you against taking any evasive action or creating difficulties for the law enforcement officers. Your wife and children are going nuts with sorrow and dread. You are desperate beyond common sense.

At about the same time your neighbor had been struggling to comply with the NAIS, but the cost (thousands of dollars) and confusion (14 reports to file and 3 charts to maintain on each and every individual cow) had finally forced him to sell his small dairy herd and switch to growing genetically modified canola.

Seven hundred miles away, an Amish farmer is visited by a team of inspectors and told that he is in protracted violation of the NAIS and subject to extensive fines and having his animals confiscated and probably destroyed². The Amish man, surprised and upset, points out that all the members of his extended community must also be in violation for none of them have complied either. Too bad. He is informed that his farm was selected randomly to be a test case the outcome of which they hoped would teach others of his persuasion an important lesson.

Four hundred miles in the other direction, young Brenda curries her 4-H steer in anticipation of a coming fair date. She doesn't even think about the expensive implanted micro-chip which "talks" to a global positioning radar informing federal computers of the exact whereabouts of "Fritz" at all times. Someone at data central has accidentally entered a wrong code number and Brenda's Fritz mistakenly shows up as an animal which must be most likely destroyed² immediately.

In Washington, D.C. word comes that a cow stumbles and falls down in convulsions in a stockyard in Idaho. NAIS in place, the origin of the cow and every farm or ranch it has been on are immediately identified. Before any test results come in, the feds scurry to quarantine not only all the animals on those three outfits, but for safe measure, all the cattle on small operations for a three county radius. (Feedlots, and large operations are exempted from the drag net because it is believed that they have better, industrial controls.) The test results finally come in and they are suspiciously inconclusive. In other words, Mad Cow Disease cannot be conclusively determined as the condition. To be safe the USDA orders the destruction of all quarantined cattle, a move deemed to restore the public's confidence in the food system. A move reminiscent of the terrible devastating recent days for many British cattle farmers. Twelve cattle ranchers are effectively run out of business. That's twelve ranchers who were in full compliance with the NAIS program. The final results of the cow's autopsy determines that no Mad Cow Disease was involved. But the damage is done and the public is led to believe that the system works.

In northern California a bull with a micro-chip breaks out of a small rancher's pasture and visits the neighbor's much larger herd only to be inadvertently herded with them to summer pasture. Four months later the bull is discovered to belong to someone else. Both ranchers are fined \$1,000 each for failure to monitor the whereabouts of the bull and fully report to the NAIS.

In the hills of Appalachia a veterinarian visits a poor hill farm to doctor a mule and discovers a

mixture of unregistered livestock. He knows that he will get into a great deal of trouble if he does not turn these folks in to the animal ID cops. He must and he does turn in his long time clients.

Fast forward a few traumatic months: the entire country is resigned to the propagandistic federal explanation that their food system is now safer because it is in the hands of clean, tested, regulated, professionals operating factory farms. The only individuals maintaining flocks or herds of livestock are the very rich, who can afford the electronics, the testing and the evolving bribery network.

The USDA readies itself for oblivion as it has merged with the Department of Commerce after retiring hordes of agricultural economists, statisticians, clinicians, program managers, and third level bureaucrats. The extension service is discontinued as no longer relevant. And the White House chef, concerned about flavor as well as safety, is quietly having all meats, cheeses, fruits and vegetables flown in from Europe.

Monsanto merges with Walmart and the resulting megalithic corporation is acquired by the Chinese government and the name changed to ChinaMart. All food distribution and retail is standardized in America with a resulting rapid increase in food prices. Hundreds of millions of acres of US farmland revert back to a feral state as wholesale food and fiber production is moved south of the Equator. Dedicated American farmers relocate to Canada, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Mexico, and China. All major tractor and farm chemical manufacturers close their US operations and move south and east.

Whoa, whoa! None of this need happen! None of it! We still have the means to stop it right now! There is only one thing that bureaucracies and businesses must listen to, and that is the sound of tens of thousands of people saying in a clear and resolute voice "YOU CAN'T DO THIS!" We are mindful of the fact that the stakes are high no matter what way you go. Take us for example. If we don't say anything and just wish this whole business to go away, we will find it difficult to continue business with this magazine, we will lose credibility with you and with ourselves. On the other hand, by past experience we are painfully aware of the possible consequences if we make public statements as strong as those you have just read. We risk offending you and having you turn away. And there are entities which, if threatened, believe they can shut this publication down, and they are not above trying. If we stand as one voice in a few I am certain we will be made to feel the heat. If however, we are but one of thousands of voices, it will be difficult or impossible for them to shut us all up or down. I feel so strongly about this issue, this battle front, that I am willing to wager the very existence of this, our publication, in an effort to stop the National Animal Identification System.

This plan is patently unAmerican. It strikes at the very core of the Bill of Rights, the Constitution and deep into the heart of the agrarian philosophies which built this great country. Some of you might reasonably wonder if I'm being too alarmist, too extreme in my view. I don't think so. If this program becomes law are you going to promise that it won't evolve to the point that many if not most of us will find it difficult, expensive or downright impossible to keep livestock? Are you comfortable with the private sector, headed up by chemical and bio-engineering companies, controlling a data base which has your home, your barn, your livestock all electronically connected to a mapping system? Are you willing to turn over to a bureaucrat the life and death power over all of your livestock? This is no time for us to sit back! I don't care if you think my tone too strident; I do care that you wake up to this very real threat. We farmers are threatened by a deep specific totalitarianism which would be comic if it weren't so ugly in consequence. It is just the beginning.

We can, with an uproar, stop this thing. But we need to be realistic about the fact that it isn't the

first time and it won't be the last. Our organic standards have been taken from us by the USDA and its corporate affiliates. Monsanto has succeeded, through mutating patenting laws, in controlling vast seed store houses and crippling small farmers in the courts. Now together with USDA they propose to "protect" the food supply and rid the nation of its true farmers, the independents who by their definition and vocation must and do protect land, soil, water, seed stock and livestock.

In my advancing years I have felt the need to exercise discretion when picking my fights. Not because of waning strength or courage, but rather because time is so precious and if I am going to join a battle front it needs to be for a cause above doubt. This is just such a cause. I plan on clamping on to the seat of their pants with my jaw set tight and holding on for the ride. I am asking you to join me.

Below we offer some addresses and places to go for more information. We need to bury our state officials, and the US congress, in mounds of letters of protest. We, at Small Farmer's Journal, plan on sending out 15 letters a day for however long it takes to get heard. For we farmers the issue may be clear cut; for the mass media and general public it may be quite a bit more difficult to see the problem. We can work on crafting intelligent ways to educate the public, but I personally believe our time is best spent rallying our own ranks to write letters and make phone calls to our elected officials. This plan, by our estimation, will negatively affect ten million rural American residents. If we can rally but a fourth of those, we have a mighty loud collective voice.

This animal ID issue cuts across all socio/economic boundaries; rich or poor, young or old, black or white, male or female, christian or buddist, liberal or conservative. If you are a farmer who owns even just one animal - it matters to you. If you are a consumer who values your direct connection to farmers - this issue matters to you. It matters to every citizen of this country.

There are a few excellent organized efforts working against the NAIS. We ask that you take the time to see which of these you feel a kinship with and join in their work. This issue is too important for it to be treated it casually. We need to act now, today, and again tomorrow. LRM

Contact Information

There are a growing number of places containing information regarding the NAIS. On the web site www.stopanimalid.org, under the heading "Take Action", you will find contact information for senators and congress people from every state, as well as for each state governor. There is contact information for a number of newspaper editors, plus examples of form letters one can use as a guide when preparing a letter to the editor or to legislators. Stop Animal ID is a fairly new organization and at this time they have only a web address. Further contact information (mailing address, phone number) should be available in the near future.

As noted elsewhere in this issue, there is a newsletter now available, Farm for Life, which, among other small farm related issues, will provide current information on the status of the NAIS. For subscription information and/or to reach the executive director write or call:

*Farm for Life, Dr. Mary-Louise Zaroni, Executive Director
P.O. Box 501, Canton, NY 13617
ph. 315/386-3199 mlz@slc.com*

To read more about the NAIS's draft strategic plan and draft program standards, go to www.usda.gov/nais. To contact the NAIS subcommittee directly, send your comments to:

*U.S. Department of Agriculture
USDA Animal & Plant Inspection Service
NAIS Subcommittee
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250*

Since the administration and enforcement of the NAIS falls to each individual state, contacting state legislators may prove to be the most effective way to get our voices heard. But it can't hurt to let our federal officials know where we stand as well:

*Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
Saxby Chambliss, Chairman
Room SR-328A
Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6000*

*House Committee on Agriculture
Bob Goodlatte, Chairman
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515*

Let's make our voices heard! ST