May 31, 2010

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U. S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

RE: New USDA Animal Disease Traceability Program
Docket No. APHIS-2010-0050

I am writing on behalf of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), established in 1863 and the largest veterinary medical association in the world. As a not-for-profit association established to advance the science and art of veterinary medicine, AVMA is the recognized national voice for the veterinary profession. The association’s more than 80,000 members comprise approximately 83% of U.S. veterinarians, all of whom are involved in myriad areas of veterinary medical practice including private, corporate, academic, industrial, governmental, military, and public health services.

The AVMA applauds you for your leadership in announcing that USDA will actively work towards developing a new framework for animal disease traceability in the United States, and will undertake several actions to further strengthen its disease prevention and response capabilities. Protecting the U.S. animal industries and national herds from devastating animal diseases is pivotal to national security, the preservation of animal health and welfare, ensuring optimal public health and the abundance of safe and nutritious food, and to the economy and trade of the United States. One only has to examine the impact of the first case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy on the United States or our nation’s multi-decade struggles to eradicate program diseases to appreciate the importance of disease traceability. We implore you to keep this initiative as one of your highest priorities and to consider ensuring that several practical elements are incorporated to make this a realistic and functional program.

While we understand the difficulties associated with implementing the National Animal Identification System (NAIS), we believe that it is imperative that many of the NAIS initiatives must be incorporated into the new approach USDA has taken for tracing animal diseases. Like USDA, the AVMA believes any new approach must capitalize and build upon the progress and investment made in the NAIS. To scrap eight years of work and the millions of dollars already invested would be an enormous backward step.

The AVMA offers some constructive suggestions for improving several of the basic tenets of an improved animal disease traceability system for the United States. Furthermore, we offer specific elements that will be required of such a system.
While the concepts surrounding the new animal disease traceability system might evolve, the AVMA is firmly convinced that USDA must lead the effort and establish uniform standards. The AVMA strongly believes the program must incorporate the following points:

1. All of the recommendations from species working groups that were submitted to the NAIS Subcommittee of the Secretary’s Advisory Committee on Foreign Animal and Poultry Diseases must be included;
2. USDA must develop minimum standards that all industries, producers and States and Tribal Nations can follow;
3. The Program must be rapidly implemented and mandatory;
4. Implementation benchmarks and timelines must be established in federal regulation in order to achieve the same NAIS goals identified in the APHIS Strategic Plan;
5. Implementation must engage all stakeholders in providing input through appropriate Subcommittees of the Secretary’s Advisory Committee on Foreign Animal and Poultry Diseases and through other designated forums;
6. All animal and animal disease traceability database(s) must have uniform architecture to allow all to communicate with one another and the data must be accessible by animal health officials 24 hours a day and 7 days a week;
7. The cost of developing the system to trace animals and animal diseases must not detract from effective implementation by industries or government agencies;
8. The traceability system must be workable for producers of all sizes;
9. An exception from freedom of information disclosure laws for data collected in support of a traceability system must be implemented; and,
10. The program must conform to, and be in accord with international animal health and disease traceability and reporting standards.

The AVMA continues to assert that any animal and disease traceability program implemented using these principles will effectively protect the United States from catastrophic outbreaks of agricultural animal diseases and greatly enhance the future of trade in animals and animal products.

As you are aware, the AVMA recently provided testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Agriculture, Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy, and Poultry. In that testimony the Association emphasized the following enduring points:

- The AVMA believes the U.S. cannot afford to wait for a devastating animal disease outbreak to make any program a reality – it needs to be a mandatory program to ensure timely implementation.
- The information needed for livestock or premise identification is not much more than that which is readily in accessible in resources such as public phone books and existing individual animal identification systems.
- The cost of implementing an effective identification system will be minimal compared to the cost associated with a widespread, uncontained outbreak of a devastating disease without an identification system.
- An effective program would help the U.S. livestock industry and state and federal government agencies track, and more quickly contain/eradicate a disease outbreak, minimizing the number of animals affected and thereby reduce the amount of animal pain, suffering and destruction.
• International standards that directly affect animal trade are moving toward the direction of traceability “from farm to fork.” If the United States is to remain competitive or grow export markets, an effective national program will be required.

• An effective program will significantly enhance the ability to rapidly track, control and eradicate endemic livestock diseases, thereby increasing overall productivity for livestock owners and associated industries.

We firmly believe that a uniform system applied to all identification technologies, livestock species, and premises is fundamental to an effective and efficient program. We believe that animals need to be identified using a uniform numbering system applied to all technologies used (not just ear tags), all species, and all production premises (from aquaculture to zoos). We also recognize and believe the program should develop an animal group identification system to accommodate some animal industries that will have difficulty indentifying individual animals held in large groups (e.g. commercial poultry and aquaculture).

Many states have already implemented programs that will be useful for tracing animals and animal diseases and at least one third of the premises and animals are already registered for what was to be the NAIS. We must not lose this progress. We believe that USDA must encourage, assist, and recognize and accept individual states programs that meet standards established by USDA. This action would expedite implementation of a fully functional traceability program in short order. This action would also provide a strong incentive for individual states to consider the promulgation of appropriate state regulations that would support an integrated and uniform approach for the whole country.

Several issues appear to have emerged in the recent meetings for which we offer the following suggestions or comments, and reinforce several critical points.

**Program Administration and Jurisdiction**

Because the program directly involves and affects interstate and international trade and commerce, the USDA must lead, not follow. While it has been proposed that States and Tribal Nations will develop and administer their own disease traceability programs, we firmly believe that USDA must develop a model program with minimum standards that states can conform to and implement. A single framework developed by USDA will provide the guidance and some flexibility for States and Tribes to work out solutions that work best for them at the local/regional level and will ensure efficient interstate movement of animals.

It has been announced that the program would only involve animals moved in interstate commerce. We reinforce, that because animal identification and disease traceability are of international importance and a cornerstone of confidence in U.S. animals and animal products, the program must compliment and conform to international standards. In addition, APHIS has already announced a new approach to current national disease eradication programs (e.g., bovine brucellosis and tuberculosis) that involves “regionalization” – an approach that crosses state borders and jurisdiction and meets international standards. However, unless USDA takes leadership and implements an animal and disease traceability program that states can uniformly followed, the regionalization approach will have to be abandoned.

Furthermore, if each state is allowed to develop and implement its own program it is counterintuitive that this will allow seamless movement of animal or animal disease information across state borders.
Technology

It has been proposed that the new animal and disease traceability program will use lower-cost technology. While it is somewhat unclear what technologies might be utilized, we strongly assert that advanced technology, including electronic animal identification (e.g., RFID) and online web-based databases to track animal movement and disease occurrence are imperative if the program is to be effective and not disrupt animal production and trade. This technology is not low-cost. USDA must be prepared to make the financial commitment to implement it, or future U.S. animal agriculture, food production and trade will be severely, negatively impacted.

A possible model to follow

The AVMA believes that other existing programs that involve federal and state regulations and responses to animal disease issues might serve as excellent models for implementing an animal and disease traceability program, most notably the National Veterinary Accreditation Program (NVAP). The USDA promulgated national standardized regulations for the NVAP and states have uniformly implemented and managed state-wide programs with the support of USDA. The NVAP program has functioned effectively for many decades in a true federal-state partnership. This same approach may be the optimal way to implement animal and disease traceability programs.

In addition, linking indemnification programs to the implementation of traceability programs could provide a strong stimulus for the acceptance, implementation and compliance with USDA animal and disease traceability programs and regulations. States and producers will quickly recognize that implementing and complying with traceability program standards and regulations is a collective insurance policy in the event of an animal disease emergency.

We hope these comments offer constructive suggestions for a program that can be rapidly implemented to protect U.S. animal agriculture from catastrophic disease outbreaks and, at the same time boost state and national production and international trade for the betterment of the Nation, U.S. industries and the public at large.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide input on this important matter. Should you have additional questions please feel free to contact me or Dr. David Scarfe (dscarfe@avma.org; 847-285-6634).

Yours sincerely,

W. Ron DeHaven DVM, MBA
Executive Vice President, CEO

WRD/ECG/ads

C: Dr. Neil Hammerschmidt, USDA-APHIS, Animal Disease Traceability Program Manager