

‘Queensland, we have a problem.’

Aussie producers say the only problem they’re having with a national animal identification program is that it doesn’t work.

By Chuck Kiker, president and Region V director, Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund, United Stockgrowers of America

At the Australian Beef Association’s annual convention in November 2004, I spoke about the U.S. National Animal Identification System. While visiting Australia, I learned that cattle producers there had been told the United States had an animal identification system in place, and was ahead of them in the race to implement a nationwide program.

In July 2005, Australia mandated a National Livestock Identification System. Earlier this year, I returned to Australia to address ABA for a second time, and gained incredible insight into the challenges U.S. cattle producers will likely face if, like Australia, the Agriculture Department implements a nationwide mandatory animal identification plan.

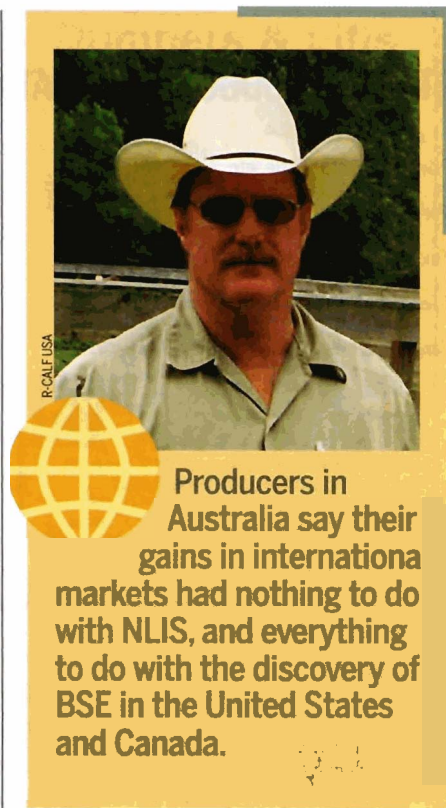
Australian producers apparently were told the United States and Canada would take away crucial international markets if Australia didn’t implement an animal ID system, so NLIS was mandated to help ensure access to those markets.

After nearly a year, Australian producers are frustrated with NLIS. During my second visit, I toured several ranches and

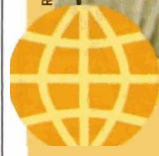
visited with producers who said they were extremely concerned about NLIS — in particular, the additional cost, additional time and numerous inaccuracies associated with the program. They said their gains in international markets had nothing to do with NLIS, and everything to do with the discovery of BSE in the United States and Canada.

Many Australian cattle operations, particularly those in Queensland, are very large, sometimes encompassing several ranches. I met very few ranchers that ran less than 1,000 head, and several that ran more than 50,000. The producers shared some of the specific problems with NLIS:

- ➔ Producer accounts in the database contain numerous errors in herd counts and/or transfer records.
- ➔ Wands that appear to function fail to properly record information, leaving producers with no alternative but to redo work and re-sort entire groups of cattle.
- ➔ Data-entry error codes sent to producers aren’t explained and/or take hours to correct.
- ➔ Enormous costs are associated with the man hours required to work cattle and multiple chute runs. Another result is stress and weight loss in the cattle.
- ➔ Human errors transferring phone-in data often result in the assignment of entire herds to incorrect premises.
- ➔ Hardware failures result in less than 80 percent readability in some sale yards.
- ➔ Producers must contend with long waiting periods while attempting to phone in cattle movement data.
- ➔ Producers are charged additional fees by some of the cattle-handling facilities



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that employ third-party agents to read and record identification information.

Australian producers also know that the low-frequency tags NLIS uses are outdated, and point out that they have had tail tags and a paper declaration system that worked well for over 20 years.

U.S. cattle producers and USDA should study these challenges to determine whether the cost of a mandatory U.S. animal identification system would outweigh the benefit. Current disease-protection measures administered by our state and national animal health departments have helped U.S. cattle producers earn the reputation of producing the safest, most wholesome beef product in the world.

At the end of the day, the country that produces the best-tasting, highest-quality and safest beef for the most economical price is the country that will gain access to international markets. ©