

New livestock identification regulations not burdensome, cattle expert reports

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The new rules require dairy cows and sexually intact beef cattle over 18 months of age to be registered when they are shipped across state lines and outline acceptable forms of identification. In most cases, farmers and ranchers are likely to use ear tags that assign a number to each animal. Credit: Penn State

The new livestock identification program recently launched by the federal government should not place a significant burden on producers in Pennsylvania or the East, according to an expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

The regulations will help agriculture officials track livestock in cases of [disease outbreaks](#), allowing epidemiological investigators to quickly learn from which farm a suspect animal originated, according to John Comerford, associate professor of animal science, who coordinates Penn State's beef program.

"The new system's main goal is to track animals' movements so agriculture and [health officials](#) can quickly establish quarantines and take other steps to prevent the spread of disease," Comerford said.

The rules, which went into effect March 11, require [dairy cows](#) and sexually intact [beef cattle](#) over 18 months of age to be registered when they are shipped across state lines and outline acceptable forms of identification. In most cases, farmers and ranchers are likely to use ear tags that assign a number to each animal.

However in some cases, tattoos and old-fashioned brand marks are acceptable forms of animal identification. The new program gives states flexibility in deciding how animals will be identified—an important concession to cattle ranchers in Western states, where brands are still commonly used, Comerford said.

In many cases, [livestock producers](#) already have been affixing identification to their animals, Comerford noted, to keep track of medical treatments such as tuberculosis vaccinations, medications and feed requirements. "All purebred producers, for example, are using tattoos," he said. "And some will also have the metal TB tags in place."

Comerford pointed out that animal identification has been required in Europe for many years, and producers there readily accept the concept.

"This is not a very rigorous program, but it is a step in the right direction for animal identification and tracking in the case of an outbreak of disease," Comerford said of the new regulations.



While the new federal program covers a range of livestock, much of the focus has been on cattle. Credit: Penn State

"For most producers it is not going to be any kind of burdensome operation. The younger animals, feeder cattle that are being transported, are not part of this process. It is basically mature animals that will be transported across state lines, animals that are going to shows and exhibitions, that sort of thing—and most of the time they are already

identified.

"So I don't think producers should see this is a huge burden. But they should see the power that it provides in terms of allowing animals to be tracked back in the case of a disease outbreak."

The federal government has been trying for nearly a decade to establish an animal identification system, Comerford explained. It introduced a voluntary program in 2006 but scrapped it several years later amid widespread complaints from farmers about the expense and red tape.

Some also worried about possible privacy violations with the collection of information about their properties. The program ultimately failed because relatively few participated.

"The resistance that has occurred at the national level to animal identification came from the more extensive livestock operations in the West and High Plains, where it becomes very problematic for people to undertake animal identification," he said. "But it is now mandatory and they will have to comply."

While the new federal program covers a range of livestock, much of the focus has been on cattle. That's partly because aggressive programs to fight diseases in other species, such as sheep scabies, have already resulted in widespread identification of those [animals](#), explained Comerford.

"Tracking cows has been less of a concern over the past decade because earlier programs targeting diseases that affect them have been successful," he said. "Still, tracebacks occasionally have to be done, and [animal identification](#) will make those investigations faster and easier."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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