

Points of View

A forum for sharing perspectives from across the Canadian Sheep Industry



CANADIAN SHEEP FEDERATION

SEPTEMBER 2010

VOLUME 4 • ISSUE 9

Myth: The intention of mandatory RFID tags is to be able to trace animals to the original producer for the purpose of penalizing that producer in the event of a disease or food safety issue.

Mandatory RFID tags will be part of a traceability system that provides benefits for all stakeholders – from producers to consumers. When it comes to dealing with liability for disease and food safety outbreaks, a strong traceability system gives the sheep industry the ability to identify, isolate, effectively manage and minimize the impact on all producers and the products they produce.

Following the rules of a traceability system also gives producers the ability to demonstrate due diligence as an effective defence to a liability claim. This position was recently supported in a paper written by lawyer Thomas Manes of Miller Thomson LLP for OnTrace, the Ontario-based champion of agri-food traceability.

There is a general assumption that being traceable means that producers would be held accountable and found liable for food contamination incidences coming from their farms and that by remaining anonymous this risk is eliminated. Under Canadian law, regardless of whether a producer is known or not, we are all liable for the quality of the products we produce. However, in his paper, Manes says that rather than traceability being a tool for prosecution of producers, having a traceability system in

A larger concern is that without a traceability system in place, producers are at greater risk of having their business adversely affected by the actions of another producer and the resulting negative impact on the industry as a whole.

place gives producers the necessary tools to demonstrate due diligence and best management practices, and thereby protect themselves from unfounded or inaccurate claims.

Traceability systems could make producers more open to being named in legal action, but when combined with best management practices and due diligence they also provide a strong defence against claims of negligence. A larger concern is that without a traceability system in place, producers are at greater risk of having their business adversely affected by the actions of another producer and the resulting negative impact on the industry as a whole.

The full Manes article can be found online at: www.ontraceagrifood.com/admincp/uploadedfiles/Liability%20Traceability%20Paper%20-%20Nov%202009.pdf

To provide further perspective on traceability we talked with Rob McNabb, Canadian Cattlemen's Association General Manager of Operations. McNabb shares interesting perspectives on cattle industry traceability and the role it's played in helping the industry manage and recover from the impacts of BSE. They have also used their animal ID and traceability system to negotiate trade. You'll find that story on pages 4-5.

Send your comments to pointsofview@cansheep.ca, or contact Jennifer MacTavish directly by phone at 1-888-684-7739 or at jennifer@cansheep.ca.

Letters to the Editor

Comments on mandatory RFID tags (July edition of Points of View)

In the July edition of Points of View our case study featured stakeholder perspectives on the decision to make Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) ear tags mandatory for all sheep produced in Canada. We had two readers comment on the following opinion from Blaine Kellington, a lamb and sheep dealer based at High River, Alberta.

"My second piece of advice is to work with the entire industry on this initiative. Make sure there are people set in place to read tags at the processing plants. I've had experiences with condemned animals where nobody was there to read the tags so I wasn't able to get any information to follow up on. Someone needs to be in place to read the tags or the information is useless." – Blaine Kellington

Debbie Chikousky

Chikousky Farms, Manitoba

This is the kind of thing that has producers very concerned. This program is to secure food safety in case of a disease outbreak such as mad cow, tuberculosis, etc – not every day issues like this.

The abattoir is NOT supposed to gain our personal info from these tags at least that is what we have been told since our cows got tags; the Canadian Food Inspection Agency would be the ones that could access this info. Goats will be launching an animal identification program soon and this kind of access to personal info is exactly what breeders were baulking about.

"These programs are not supposed to be used to help out the abattoirs' bottom lines and punish producers for things they are sometimes not even responsible for."

Editor's Note: To clarify, the use of RFID tags in sheep does not give abattoirs access to producers' personal information. Access to sheep industry information in CCIA has been restricted to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Canadian Sheep Federation.

The CFIA's right to access comes from legislation and is documented in the regulations and in the Memorandum of Understanding between the CFIA and the CCIA. They can access the database in the event of a Foreign Animal Disease, a food safety issue, or to verify compliance.

The RCMP's right of access to personal information comes from the privacy legislation that allows access to information for the purposes of an investigation. They do not (usually) access the database but rather request information from the CCIA, CFIA or CSF directly.

The CSF access to the database has been limited to aiding the RCMP or producers locate the owners of lost or stolen sheep, in response to CFIA request to trace back for scrapie, or to trace back *C. ovis* condemned or affected carcasses. The responsibility of accessing the information has rested with the Executive Director.

Letters to the Editor

Comments on mandatory RFID tags (July edition of Points of View)

Lorna Wall

Poplarfield,
Manitoba

In other words, it is still not for food safety, but just to penalize the original producer.

These animals could have been at any number of places (to pick up worms, etc.) in-between, but this RFID traceability still doesn't show where they were all the way. An RFID tag does not supply movement records so there is still no more traceability than before. It is not the tag that is the issue, but the recordkeeping.

"An RFID tag does not supply movement records so there is still no more traceability than before."

Comments on scrapie genotyping (August edition of POV)

Neil Versavel

Manitoba

I breed Suffolk and have a flock of about 50 ewes in Manitoba with ever-evolving plans of expansion. I participated in the scrapie genotyping survey and I do think it is important that we develop scrapie resistant sheep, however, I do not currently test my sheep for scrapie. The main reason is the cost. As far as I can tell, the average commercial producer in

"The fact of the matter is that, at present, there really isn't any incentive for commercial producers to seek out and pay more for scrapie resistant sheep."

Manitoba still only wants to pay \$250 for a breeding ram. At that price I have trouble justifying the effort of being a purebred breeder, let alone testing for scrapie.

Our industry in its current state cannot supply domestic demand so there is no pressure related to export restrictions associated with scrapie. Since BSE hit in 2003, trade with the US has all but disappeared. And while scrapie is definitely present in Canada, its overall impact on producers is really minimal. Foot rot, enzootic abortion and predators play a much greater role in producers exiting the sheep industry. We could even add more to that list, but I think you would still be hard-pressed to put scrapie on that list.

When such a time arrives that I believe I am receiving full value for my breeding stock based on their production potential I may then consider genotyping, but only if I think it will pay for itself.

Traceability and managing a crisis

Having an animal identification (ID) and traceability system in place not only strengthens an industry but it can play an important role in minimizing the negative impact of an animal health or food crisis.

The Canadian cattle industry has gained a lot of experience over the years in this department. They have developed, implemented and used their animal ID and traceability system to negotiate trade and recover from a major animal health crisis.

Recently, the Canadian Sheep Federation spoke with Rob McNabb, General Manager of Operations at the Canadian Cattlemen's Association (CCA) about this very important topic. McNabb has over 30 years experience in the agriculture industry and for the past 14 years he's been working on animal health issues with the CCA. He's been involved with the cattle industry's ID and traceability system since its early days of development and he was part of the team that helped the cattle industry recover from the 2003 BSE crisis.

The need for ID and traceability

In 1998, the Canadian cattle industry took its first steps to create an animal ID system. McNabb says the industry was working to expand its export markets and running into new animal health recommendations from various trading partners and the World Organization for Animal Health. "It became very evident that it would be difficult to regain market access following an animal health crisis with no system in place so we had to make some changes," McNabb says.

Twelve years later, the cattle industry has a well-developed animal ID and traceability system in place. Requirements include mandatory tagging of all cattle leaving a farm – going to slaughter or changing ownership – and premise ID, which allows animals to be traced back to their farm of origin.

The industry is continuing to build the system to further strengthen its traceability capacities. "Right now the system only takes us to the packers' door. There are still some challenges around retaining ID as it moves forward to the retailers and consumers but we're working on it," McNabb says.

Acknowledging ID & traceability benefits

The response from the industry has come in stages, McNabb says. There was some early resistance in the first few years of implementation and some producers had a difficult time adjusting. "I think producers were feeling the whole 'Big Brother' connotation – someone coming in, tracking their information, telling them what to do – and they didn't like it," he says.

Traceability and managing a crisis

To deal with this, the CCA worked hard to show producers that this was an initiative for the industry, lead by the industry. “We had cattle producers speaking to cattle producers and I think that made the world of difference,” says McNabb. Over time, the majority of the industry has come around. Most cattle producers are accepting of the national ID and traceability system and some have embraced it after recognizing its benefits. Of course there are still a handful of producers who remain resistant but McNabb has recognized that you can’t change everyone’s mind.

Building a system that benefits all

According to McNabb, there’s a fine balance between setting up an ID and traceability system that gives the industry a competitive edge but doesn’t end up costing producers more money. “While the industry leadership supports advancing traceability because it has more benefits than faults, we’ll only agree to a system that doesn’t come with a huge price tag for producers,” says McNabb. The CCA has had to work very closely with government on this task and a lot of compromising on both sides of the table has been required.

The industry’s efforts seem to be coming full circle. McNabb says some of the industry’s most recent trade achievements have been a result of having an animal ID and traceability system in place. “We have a competitive advantage over countries that don’t have a system,” he says. “Therefore, the potential is there to increase the value of the cattle in getting more markets that are willing to compete for the product.”

Using ID and traceability to manage a crisis

Speed is the critical factor when it comes to managing an animal health or food crisis, McNabb says. The system needs to have mechanisms in place to respond, react and recover quickly. “The less time it takes for recovery to start the less impact the industry feels and the less money producers lose,” he says.

The foundation piece of the system is the ID and the ability to trace the diseased animal back to its farm of origin. Once again, speed is a must. “You want to determine the farm of origin as soon as possible. This way the disease can be contained and you can reduce its further spread,” says McNabb. It also gives the industry the opportunity to focus its efforts elsewhere. Once the farm of origin has been determined, the industry can implement disease control and get moving on recovery.

Drawing from his experience with the 2003 BSE crisis, McNabb says the worst thing about an animal health crisis is the uncertainty and not knowing what will happen next. Having an animal ID and traceability system in place reduces the amount of uncertainty to a large degree, he says. “Because our industry had a well developed system in place we were able to show that we had the situation under control and confidence in our recovery process. This seemed to ease some of the anxiety that people were feeling and helped our industry move forward quicker.”

Your feedback is essential!

This forum will only be successful if everyone weighs in with their own perspectives from their place in the industry. Tell us:

- What you think about "Points of View"
- If you had a strong reaction – either good or bad – to the first feature editorial
- If you want to contribute to an upcoming issue
- If you have a topic you'd like to see addressed
- If you have a story that would make a good case study for others to learn from

What's in it for you? Most people don't often get a chance to have their opinion heard. This is yours. Use it to help make an impact on the future of our business. **Send your comments, suggestions and questions to pointsofview@cansheep.ca or call CSF at 519-824-6018 or 1-888-684-7739.**

In the next issue...

Myth: Canadian lamb faces stiff competition from imported product from Australia and New Zealand, which threatens to further erode Canadian producers share of our domestic market.

Sheep producing nations around the world are currently struggling to fill consumers' growing appetite for lamb. It's estimated that Australia's flock is now the smallest in more than 100 years. The United States Department of Agriculture asserts that US sheep and lamb numbers are at their lowest level since the Second World War. And the Canadian ewe flock has decreased for six straight years.

In reality, these dramatic declines are forcing countries such as Australia and New Zealand to become closer allies to support the consumption of lamb in all world markets. There is tremendous competition from other meats, and if consumer demand is not met all lamb-producing nations will be negatively impacted if lamb loses its place on restaurant menus and in supermarket meat counters.

- How could sheep-producing nations work together to ensure that sheep meat remains on the menu?
- How could different countries work together to grow flocks to supply burgeoning demand?
- What action should the Canadian sheep industry and its stakeholders be taking to help increase our domestic lamb supply?

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