

# Vilsack's NAIS "Listening Sessions" Avoid Hotbed States (WI, MO, MI)

by Mary Zaroni

A recent *Time* magazine story called the National Animal Identification System "highly controversial, confusing, and, in many rural parts of the country, downright detested." NAIS truly is detested by the majority of farmers, but the USDA stubbornly persists in keeping it alive.

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack is now trying to revive the comatose NAIS through a series of "listening sessions." He's looking for "consensus" from the warring factions of big agribusiness (supporting mandatory NAIS) and real farmers (most completely against NAIS). But Vilsack's schedule avoids key states like Wisconsin and Missouri – both hothouse anti-NAIS hotbeds. (Most of the "listening sessions" may already be history by the time you read this, but the schedule is included below for those who may be able to attend some later sessions, or who may want to submit written comments.)

## NAIS critics vocal, former supporters backing away

Vilsack kicked off his "listening" about NAIS with a "Roundtable Discussion" at USDA headquarters on April 15, 2009. Representatives of 30 groups from across the agriculture spectrum – from the National Cattlemen to the North American Elk Breeders – made or submitted statements at the Roundtable. Vilsack began by trying to steer the focus toward a NAIS "that would be mandatory, as opposed to voluntary." However, after a barrage of anti-NAIS sentiment from such groups as R-CALF USA, the Livestock Marketing Association, Western Organization of Resource Councils, American Quarter Horse Association, and Public Lands Council, by the end of the Roundtable Vilsack sounded much more tentative about a "mandatory" NAIS.

Surprisingly, even such formerly pro-NAIS voices as the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, American Horse Council, and American Farm Bureau, upon more reasoned reflection, have become advocates of slowing NAIS down, narrowing its scope, and above all, keeping it voluntary. The Farm Bureau representative, Mary K. Thatcher (public policy director for commodities and livestock) stated that Farm Bureau is "very opposed to a mandatory system."

## NMPF, dairy breed associations take USDA \$ & like NAIS

So who remains in favor of a full-bore mandatory NAIS? The animal-health bureaucrats (the U.S. Animal Health Association and management at the American Veterinary Medical Association) are still agitating for a "mandatory NAIS" as soon as possible. Since NAIS would give dictatorial power to government veterinarians, their support for NAIS is akin to the police naturally being in favor of a police state. The National Pork Producers Council wants mandatory NAIS – hardly surprising, since USDA has granted the swine industry the dispensation of "group ID" that allows NAIS adoption at essentially zero cost, while their competitors in the beef sector would be burdened by expensive individual animal ID. The American Meat Institute still wants mandatory NAIS – of course, meatpackers would love a system shifting huge compliance costs to farmers, generating cattle supply information that packers could use to manipulate fed-cattle prices, and allowing packers to displace blame (and legal liability) for meat recalls back up the supply chain to feedlots and farmers.

Sadly, still taking their places among the decreasing number of pro-NAIS diehards are so-called "dairy industry representatives" Holstein USA and the National Milk Producers Federation. Both remain strongly committed to mandatory NAIS, to expensive RFID tags, and to full animal tracking. What are their motives? Could it be the USDA NAIS-promotion grants of over \$1,750,000 to Holstein USA? Or the NAIS grants of over \$1,000,000 to NMPF? Or the fact that Holstein USA already sells RFID tags as a more expensive option for breed registry? Or maybe it's the animal tracking database

## Sites, Dates for NAIS "Listening Sessions"

The seven presently scheduled meetings, announced by USDA on April 30 (just two weeks before the first meeting) are as follows:

Thursday, May 14 ..... Harrisburg, PA  
Monday, May 18 ..... Pasco, WA  
Wednesday, May 20 ..... Austin, TX  
Thursday, May 21 ..... Birmingham, AL  
Friday, May 22 ..... Louisville, KY  
Wednesday, May 27 ..... Storrs, CT  
Monday, June 1 ..... Greeley, CO

While we can hope USDA might be persuaded to hold more meetings later in the summer, there is no assurance of that. Therefore farmers are encouraged to speak out at any of these meetings they can attend. Meetings run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., but USDA has indicated that the afternoons will be spent in small-group discussions run by

"facilitators" to try to reach "consensus" on "solutions" to farmers' objections to NAIS. Baloney!

However, it seems very premature to offer concessions to the likes of Holstein USA and NMPF, who have been diligently working (and collecting USDA cash) against farmers' real interests on NAIS for years. So farmers might consider speaking out at morning sessions (you need to arrive an hour early, by 8 a.m., to register to speak), but skipping the afternoon "group" navel lint collection exercises. It's also possible to pre-register by email to USDA at [NAISsessions@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:NAISsessions@aphis.usda.gov), or by calling USDA at 301-734-0799. USDA is also now taking written comments about NAIS at: <http://www.regulations.gov/fdmspublic/component/main?main=DocketDetail&d=APHIS-2009-0027>

("IDairy") run by NMPF and Holstein USA (along with the Jersey Association, DHIA, National Association of Animal Breeders, and Dairy Calf & Heifer Association). If NAIS becomes mandatory, the IDairy partners stand to earn hundreds of millions of dollars annually by charging livestock owners a fee for recording every change in status or ownership of every cow in the United States.

Whatever the motive, Holstein USA's manager of dairy ID programs, Adam Griffin, purporting to speak on behalf of 30,000 members, urged USDA to implement "a national mandatory animal identification program as fast as possible." Griffin demonstrated a familiarity with the Kansas State University cost-benefit analysis on NAIS – which suggests that Holstein USA was given preferential early access to that document by USDA personnel. The cost-benefit analysis was not publicly released until some two weeks after the Roundtable Discussion. At the Roundtable, the representatives of the U.S. Cattlemen's Association and Livestock Marketing Association, groups opposing mandatory NAIS, remarked that they had not yet had access to the long-promised cost-benefit analysis. Why were USDA/APHIS personnel apparently leaking early copies of the cost-benefit document to the pro-NAIS Holstein USA, while withholding the same document from NAIS skeptics such as the USCA and LMA?

Jerry Kozak, CEO and President of the National Milk Producers Federation, sang exactly the same tune as Holstein USA's Griffin. Claiming to represent "40,000 producers" through NMPF member cops, NMPF stated its standing policy as "the establishment of a mandatory national identification system at the earliest possible date." Truly, does Jerry Kozak speak for **real** dairy farmers? A recent editorial in *Lancaster Farming* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania) perceptively noted that these Captains of Ag-Industry always refer to "stakeholders" or "producers" but never to real, down-to-earth, human "farmers" or "ranchers." Unlike some of the groups opposed to mandatory NAIS, such as R-CALF or the Western Organization of Resource Councils, there is no indication that the pro-NAIS Holstein USA or NMPF have ever made any attempt to poll actual farmers on their views about NAIS.

## No listening in Wisconsin or surrounding states!

This problem of inadequate – or even false – representation of farmers' views brings us to the USDA's "listening sessions" for NAIS. At the close of the Roundtable Discussion, Secretary Vilsack promised a series of listening sessions "throughout the country . . . over the course of the next several months." However, after the actual scheduling apparently had been assigned to NAIS program personnel, what resulted were seven meetings, all crammed into two weeks of planting season. Many sites are far from the centers of NAIS opposition.

Wisconsin is literally the "birthing ground for NAIS." For several years, "America's Dairyland" has served as the national pilot program and blue-

print for intended nationwide NAIS. But Wisconsin has become mired in controversy over misleading legislators about the mandatory nature of its premises registration program. Legislation to rescind the mandatory program is now pending in the Wisconsin legislature. The state agriculture department has sicced the Clark County district attorney into prosecuting an Amish farmer for refusing to violate his religious beliefs by getting a premises ID. That farmer's father, last August, warned the state agriculture board of the price of "Eternal Damnation" feared by members of his faith, if they were forced to comply with dictates to register their premises under Wisconsin law.

## Meeting details ... even if belated

Yet USDA plans no "listening session" in Wisconsin or any states surrounding "America's Dairyland." Michigan made RFID NAIS cattle identification mandatory several years ago and the state is being sued by farmers whose religious beliefs preclude use of RFID or similar systems. Yet USDA plans no "listening session" in Michigan. In Missouri, the farmers' revolt against NAIS was so passionate and widespread that small grassroots groups were able to pass legislation outlawing mandatory NAIS at the state level, despite well-funded take-no-prisoners opposition from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the Farm Bureau – yes, the selfsame NCBA and Farm Bureau that, under pressure from their own members, have since come around to opposing mandatory NAIS. Yet there is no USDA "listening session" in Missouri.

## No mailing address provided for farmers' comments!

Even though, according to USDA's 2007 Census of Agriculture, over 43% of U.S. farms have no internet access, USDA has not given any postal address for mailing these NAIS comments. Under the circumstances, it would be appropriate to mail them directly to:

**Secretary Tom Vilsack**  
**U.S. Department of Agriculture**  
**1400 Independence Ave SW**  
**Washington DC 20250-0003**

The pro-NAIS forces are in retreat. Show them you're a true "stakeholder." Drive a stake through the heart of this NAIS vampire that refuses to die a natural death.

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