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US Govt,Beef Indus To Take Harder Look At Tracking Cattle

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

DENVER (AP)--Efforts to develop high-tech versions of the old branding iron to track cattle from ranch to dinner table are expected to take on a new urgency now that a suspected case of mad cow disease has been found in the U.S.

Before the mad cow incident, a task force of industry and government experts had drafted a preliminary plan for a national tracking system to quickly quell outbreaks of disease or threats of terrorism.

Now the task seems more important than ever.

"We already have the ability to reasonably track livestock from the point of harvest back to the farm of origin. We're now in the process of going to a system that will be faster," said Tom Field, animal science professor at Colorado State University in Fort Collins.

The task force has explored tracking cattle and other farm animals with radio frequency devices in ear tags or implants as part of the U.S. Animal Identification Plan. Other technologies may be required to determine the origin of several different animals that usually make up a batch of ground beef.

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The Animal Identification Plan is expected to be implemented over the next three years, Terry Stokes, chief executive officer of the Denver-based National Cattlemen's Beef Association, said in a conference call Wednesday.

A national, uniform system would allow the rapid tracking of animals to stem the spread of disease

through quarantines and slaughter of animals if necessary. The preliminary plan calls for getting the information within 48 hours.

Western ranchers consider the proposed system as an update of one they've used for more than a century: brands. Ranchers grazing cattle and moving herds through the vast Western expanses needed a way to show which animals belonged to them.

"We were trying to chase the rustlers a long time ago, and we came up with this," southwestern Colorado rancher Tom Compton said of branding.

Most Western states, including Colorado, Wyoming, Utah and New Mexico, still require brands, checked by state inspectors when livestock cross state lines or change hands. The branding system also works as a way to monitor animals for diseases, said Wayne Cunningham, Colorado state veterinarian.

But Cunningham conceded that a uniform tracking system alone won't allow industry and government officials to identify the source of all the cattle that make up batches of ground beef.

"A batch of hamburger could represent, potentially, 300 or 400 head of cattle or parts of cattle," Cunningham said.

Rex Moore, president of Maverick Ranch Natural Meats in Denver, said a uniform system is needed, but believes it should be flexible enough to incorporate developing technology. He has used a small, hand-held computer called an OptiReader to take retinal images of his cattle.

"It's an individual fingerprint that can't be duplicated," Moore said.

Verifying an animal's ownership and the conditions in which it was raised is important to Moore's business, which sells certified, organically grown beef and other products to 2,000 supermarkets.

"I want to be able to look at a box of Maverick Ranch beef and tell you what 10 or 15 animals that beef might have come from," Moore said.

On the Net:

U.S. Animal Identification Plan: <http://usaip.info>

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