Canada took a big step in the expansion of its livestock tracking programs when the government announced plans to establish a new national system that will provide data and services to industry-run livestock tracking organizations. When up and running, the new system will mark the first time that Canada has a single, national livestock traceability infrastructure in place.

Canada has had a mandatory identification system for cattle and bison since 2001, making it possible to identify and track animals during food safety or animal health emergencies. The industry-led Canadian Cattle Identification Agency runs the cattle ID program. Quebec has a parallel organization, which is also run by industry.

Once in place, Canadian Agri-Traceability Services, or CATS, will integrate the two organizations’ reporting data and allow producers to report to a single agency. Federal officials say the program will provide a more effective traceability system in the event of an animal health emergency.

Under Canada’s current system, all cattle and bison must be tagged before leaving the farm where they were born. Imported animals must also be tagged, unless they are headed for immediate slaughter. Beef cattle have been a particular focus of livestock tracing programs. Before beef is served on a plate, the steer may have had four or more owners, as well as crossed the border between Canada and the United States for feeding and slaughter.

In cases of animal disease outbreaks, tracking systems allow investigators to trace where an animal was born and follow all of its stops on the way to slaughter. A good system can help reduce the number of animals involved in an outbreak, minimize the number of animals that must be tested, and limit economic impacts when animal sales and movement must be put on hold during an investigation.

“The U.S. is behind on traceability by almost any measure,” says Glynn Tonsor, associate professor of agricultural economics at Kansas State University.

As a result, he says, U.S. beef exporters remain at a competitive disadvantage in relation to most other exporters in the event of a disease outbreak. Beef producers suffered huge losses when Asian markets were closed to both U.S. and Canadian exports in the early 2000s due to an animal disease discovery in Alberta.

Thus far, the U.S. has only had a short-lived voluntary premises-registration program, which ended in 2009. But last summer, the U.S. Department of Agriculture proposed a mandatory livestock traceability rule. It would require breeding cattle over 18 months old to have an official identification and an interstate veterinary inspection certificate or similar documentation if they move across state lines.

“The proposed rule does offer some improvements for tracking breeding animals,” Tonsor says, though he adds that
“this improvement is relative, since there are lots of exemptions in the initial phase.”

The USDA announced that it will do an evaluation after the initial phase before bringing other cattle under the rule — an indication, Tonsor says, that the effort to get all cattle covered will be a very long process.

The proposal has been opposed by many ranchers, who rely on branding to identify cattle. Under the rule, cattle would be required to have an official ear tag with a unique identifying number (branding identifies only the farm of origin). Still, Tonsor says the proposed rule will likely be implemented, noting that it is seen as “more palatable” than the voluntary premises-registration program.

The USDA expects to issue a final rule this year.