After much consternation about how to improve the nation’s system for tracing animal movements in the case of an infectious-disease outbreak, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has settled on a set of final rules that leaves much flexibility and work to the states.

Issued in January, the new guidelines were clearly shaped by input from livestock producers and policymakers from the Midwest and West.

“We are glad that the USDA was flexible enough in the final regulations to leave most of the decisions regarding method of identification and record keeping up to each state,” says Dustin Oedekoven, state veterinarian for South Dakota.

The USDA had originally proposed requiring the use of electronic ear tags and barcode scanners to track all livestock — from farm to fork.

But U.S. senators from ranching states responded by ending funding for the USDA’s animal traceability program. Meanwhile, other livestock-producing countries such as Australia and Canada have moved forward with “birth-to-store” tracking programs, leaving U.S. meat producers at a trade disadvantage.

Issuance of the final rules means a mandatory federal system is now in place. Here are some key provisions of the new rules, which most impact the movement of breeding-age cattle.

- All livestock that is moved across state lines must be identified and accompanied by documentation.
- Animals moved to custom slaughter are exempt.
- Record-keeping requirements for poultry and swine are limited to two years; for other species, records must be kept for five years.
- Metal tags, brands and breed registry tattoos will be accepted as identification, provided these forms of ID are accepted by the state shipping and receiving the animal.
- Back tags will be accepted as identification for animals moving directly to slaughter.
- Cattle under 18 months of age will have separate requirements, which will be released at a later date.

Within these broad federal guidelines, states will be responsible for determining acceptable identification methods and tracking animal movement, primarily through the use of certificates of veterinary inspection and state-maintained databases. And if animals are not being moved out of state, the federal rules do not apply.

States already have some type of traceability program in place. All, for example, require a veterinary certificate before...
livestock can be brought in from another state. But identification and farm registration methods vary.

For instance, Wisconsin in 2004 became the first state in the nation to require registration of all farms.

According to Robert Ehlenfeldt, the state’s animal health administrator, Wisconsin will continue to have requirements more stringent than the new federal rules — it will, for example, require individual identification of all sexually intact cattle, regardless of age.

Michigan has some of the most stringent traceability requirements in the nation, including a rule that cattle moving within the state have individual radio frequency identification ear tags. Indiana, which requires farm registration, will also mandate individual identification of breeding-age cattle.

In Minnesota, the state is working to “capture all animal movement possible throughout the state — from testing programs, sale barns, show records and slaughter facilities,” says Bill Hartman, executive director of the Board of Animal Health.

The state will develop a database “to provide quick trace-back should a disease event occur,” he says.

Creating a system to follow animal movement in South Dakota, Oedekoven says, will be a big change. To do this, the state has provided animal-gathering locations with renovated computers from the state’s surplus.

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