

Questions and Answers about Horses and the National Animal Identification System (NAIS)

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Q: What is the National Animal Identification System (NAIS)?

The National Animal Identification System (NAIS) is a national program being implemented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) intended to identify all agricultural animals and record their movements for the purpose of disease control.

Q: Why is the NAIS needed?

A national animal identification system is needed to help protect U.S. animal agriculture from foreign or domestic disease threats (that have been intentionally or unintentionally introduced). Finding potentially sick or exposed animals early in a disease outbreak is essential to containing or eradicating the disease.

The ultimate goal of the NAIS is to be able to identify all premises and animals that have had contact with a foreign or domestic animal disease of concern within 48 hours after discovery. As an information system that will provide for rapid tracing of infected or exposed animals during an outbreak situation, the NAIS will help limit the scope of such outbreaks and ensure that they are contained and eradicated as quickly as possible.

Q: Which species will be included in the NAIS?

The NAIS is being developed for all agricultural animals where it would be beneficial to have a system to facilitate rapid trace back/trace out in the event of disease concern. Currently working groups are developing plans for cattle/bison, horses, sheep, goats, swine, poultry, camelids (llamas and alpacas), cervids (deer and elk), and aquaculture.

Q: What is the Equine Species Working Group (ESWG)?

The Equine Species Working Group (ESWG) is the task force officially designated by the USDA to evaluate the concept of the NAIS and its application to the equine industry. The ESWG is composed of 35 representatives from the horse industry and animal health officials. The group's responsibility is to develop recommendations for a national equine identification plan that is in the best interests of and protects the rights of horse owners and breeders. The ESWG submits comments and recommendations to the USDA pointing out the unique characteristics of the equine industry and outlining positions and concerns with the national ID program. More information about the ESWG is at www.equinespeciesworkinggroup.com/.

Q: Since horses are not used for human consumption in the United States, why should the horse industry be involved in the NAIS?

The NAIS is about the health of our nation's agricultural animals, not just food safety. There are several diseases that affect horses that also affect other agricultural animals and humans (e. g. anthrax, rabies, and salmonella). Because the horse is an integral part of this country's agricultural community, those in the equine industry have the responsibility to participate in a program that will benefit it as well as other agricultural industries.

Q: What are the key components of the NAIS?

The NAIS is being established through a phased-in approach by implementing these key components:

- Premises Identification/Registration
- Animal Identification
- Animal Tracking

The first step in implementing the NAIS is identifying and registering premises that house animals. Such premises include locations where agricultural animals are managed, marketed, or exhibited. Knowing where animals are located is the key to efficient, accurate, and cost-effective disease control efforts. As premises are registered, another component of the NAIS – animal identification – will be integrated into the system. Unique Animal Identification Numbers (AINs) will be issued to individual animals that move between premises. Group/Lot Identification Numbers will be issued to animals that move in groups (commercial swine and poultry). Each industry group will determine the type of identification method for its respective species. As premises are registered and animals or groups of animals are identified, the NAIS will begin collecting information about animal movements from one premises to another. With an efficient, effective animal tracking system in place, the NAIS will be able to perform rapid alerts and trace backs in case of an animal disease outbreak.

Q: What form of animal ID will be used for horses?

The form of animal ID to be used for horses has yet to be determined. The ESWG is evaluating methods that are currently available (microchips, retinal scans, DNA, etc.). These methods along with new technologies will be studied to determine which is most efficient, cost effective, and accurate for horses.

Q: What horse movements will need to be reported?

The ESWG is working with the USDA to determine what types of horse movement will need to be reported. It is likely that movements such as change of ownership, interstate travel, and events where multiple animals commingle (events that now require a Certificate of Veterinary Inspection or other health papers) will necessitate reporting.

Q: Will the information collected by the NAIS be confidential?

The NAIS is being developed to contain only information required by animal health officials to track and identify animals suspected of carrying disease and to identify any other animals that may have been exposed to a disease. Proprietary production data will remain in private databases and will not be included in the NAIS system. The USDA is pursuing various options for appropriately protecting the information in the NAIS from public disclosure.

Q: What is the timeline for implementation of the NAIS?

Much of the NAIS, from a systems perspective, is operational; remaining systems elements soon will be. The following are key NAIS milestones:

- June 2004: Cooperative agreements established with the states and tribes
- August 2005: Premises registration systems operational in 50 states and two territories
- March 2006: Individual animal identification begins
- June 2006: Cooperative agreements with private/state animal tracking databases
- Early 2007: Private/state animal tracking databases operational

Q: What should I do now?

The immediate priority for the NAIS is premises registration. Anyone who keeps, houses, or commingles horses (e.g. farms, stables, show grounds, racetracks, veterinary clinics, markets) is encouraged to register their premises. In Virginia, the State Veterinarian’s Office of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) is responsible for premises registration. The premises registration system is a computer database system that allows for the necessary information to be collected and stored and a unique number assigned (Premises Identification Number). Premises registration may be completed online at the VDACS website (www.vdacs.virginia.gov/). In addition, local Virginia Cooperative Extension offices have premises registration forms or can offer assistance with online registration.

Q: How do I get more information on the NAIS?

More information about the NAIS is available at the United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service NAIS website, www.usda.gov/nais. More information about NAIS in Virginia is available at www.vanimalid.info.