

ONE DATABASE FOR NATIONAL ID

Officials are looking to put ATQ and CCIA data under one roof



Steve Primrose



Darcy Eddleston



Pat Hayes

Efforts by an industry-led initiative to create one centralized database for tracing cattle in Canada may become evident as early as this year, says the organization behind the project. The Canadian Agri-Traceability Services (CATS) steering committee aims to combine the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency (CCIA) and Agri-Traçabilité Québec (ATQ) databases.

Discussions began late in 2010 when members from CCIA and ATQ met in an attempt to develop a better understanding of one another's organizations. Up until then, talks about creating a centralized system had been dominated by East-West politics.

ATQ director Guy Auclair co-chairs the CATS committee with Steve Primrose, who formerly represented the Canadian Livestock Dealer's Associ-

ation on the CCIA board. "Once we had an understanding of how they were doing it in Quebec and they got an idea of Western Canada... we wanted to figure out a way that we could work together. That's how it started," says Primrose.

"People know that we're talking, but they're not quite sure what we're talking about," he adds. Among the questions being asked are will ATQ and CCIA amalgamate, and what could a centralized database mean for producers?

While CCIA is recognized as the national administrator of livestock traceability in Canada, ATQ provides those services in Quebec. Three members from each agency sits on the CATS committee plus one representative from Alberta Agriculture, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Despite the government presence Primrose says industry is driving the process. "It's industry that will put the plan together. They will implement the plan and government will support it financially because it's for the protection of our national herd."

As for what a national database might look like, that is the subject of several ongoing studies into the latest technology. "It's still early on and we're still in the discussion phase and picturing how this would work," says CCIA chairman Darcy Eddleston. "We think this is a perfect time to examine what's out there for traceability and what's best for the Canadian producers."

The steering committee hopes CATS will end up as a multi-species database serving other livestock sectors such as equine, poultry and swine. "The way we envision it is that each species would negotiate with CATS (for) the services they require," says Eddleston.

A multi-species database would spread out the costs of offering a nationwide service. But hog producers, for one, are on the cusp of implementing PigTrace, a national tracking system for hogs housed on the ATQ computers that the Canadian Pork Council (CPC) has been crafting since 2002. Even so, Jeff Clark who manages PigTrace admits the CPC is interested in a multi-species database as it would lessen competition among producers for federal dollars.

"I've acknowledged, with other livestock groups, that we're really competing with each other over the same pot of money and it would make a lot more sense both as program administrators and as a taxpayer to consolidate efforts, minimize costs and minimize confusion for our producers," he says.

Primrose agrees: "These days there isn't a lot of money to go around so this is a good solution for everybody."

But he is quick to point out that this is not an amalgamation of existing agencies. "It's an entirely new entity," he says. "CCIA would stay the national administrator for cattle, but we would dump our information into the new database and ATQ will dump their information into the new database."



Saskatchewan cattleman and a Canadian Cattlemen's Association representative on the CCIA board of directors, Pat Hayes says his support for a centralized database will depend on how it benefits producers down the line. He wants to see any cost savings used to reduce the tagging costs of the national program. "We don't want to see that raised on the producer's end."

It costs between \$3 and \$5 to tag an animal, which doesn't account for the time spent tagging or registering the data with CCIA or ATQ. Eddleston says several studies are currently underway to determine the true cost of traceability in Canada. "There have been a couple of studies out there but nobody's really sure if they're right," he says.

While Primrose admits a centralized database may not be a miracle cure it should help shorten the time needed to track diseased animals.

"This isn't the silver bullet, but I'll tell you that if you have a strong system in place in Canada it certainly won't hurt. It may not keep a border open if you have a feed contamination

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— Steve Primrose

issue, or it might, as long as you can get to where those cattle are quickly," he says.

"From my perspective the whole traceability thing has been oversold," says Hayes. "It may keep us in markets but I don't see it opening markets for us."

Eddleston believes a jointly operated centralized database should improve the level of service available to producers across Canada. Calls placed by producers could be forwarded to eastern or western bilingual service centres. "So if I'm a western producer I can call at 6 a.m. and there might not be anyone at the western

service centre but then my call could be forwarded to the eastern service provider," he explains.

Before CATS can proceed, various business and governance plans need to be approved by the ATQ and CCIA boards. "It gets pretty complicated about how all this will roll out but our goal is to try to come to a conclusion," says Eddleston.

"We have to come up with a drop-dead date and ask whether we'll go ahead with this or not. We're not even sure what it is yet, but we have to come up with that date and then all the steps involved with moving this forward," he says.

At the end of the day, Hayes says he wants to see what a centralized database will cost producers. "We may get some benefits down the road and if there are then so be it, but I don't believe in making an enormously expensive system on what we might get. We better make a system that doesn't download a whole bunch of costs on to producers." 

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