

Food Safety

USDA trying to avoid mandatory animal ID as COOL approaches.

by **Janie Gabbett**, published on *Meatingplace.com*

(JUNE 12, 2008) — USDA is boosting its efforts to get livestock producers signed up in the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) ahead of mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL) legislation that becomes effective this fall.

In an interview with *Meatingplace.com* during a two-day swing through Texas this week to visit meat and poultry processing plants, Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer said he prefers not to make NAIS mandatory but warned it could happen if not enough producers sign up voluntarily.

Meatingplace: Will the COOL provisions in the Farm Bill push USDA towards mandatory animal identification (ID)?

Schafer: I hope not. We are doing it on a voluntary basis. We have about a third of the premises signed up. We've kicked up our cooperative agreements with states and livestock organizations with a goal of getting them signed up. It seems as though if we are going to implement COOL you must have an animal ID system because you need to be able to trace things back and forth. So if it is going to be a meaningful COOL legislation we need to be able to trace product.

Meatingplace: How can you achieve that without mandating animal ID?

Schafer: We need people to sign up, or some of those guys on [Capitol Hill] are going to make it mandatory. If we want to have a system that is workable with owners we need to get them to sign up, and we are trying to make that as painless as possible and as quick and easy as we can.

Traveling with Schafer, FSIS Administrator Alfred Almanza said the agency will use its education and outreach programs to help processors implement COOL once the final regulations are defined and developed.

The recently passed farm bill sets a September timeframe for COOL to become effective. Proposed regulations are expected in July.