

AG Bill: Action Was Very Well Understood

Del. Bobby Orrock's (R-54) Letter to the Editor, "AG Bill: Action Was Misunderstood" [30 March, 2007], made unsubstantiated claims regarding recently proposed legislation in the General Assembly. A little background is needed to appreciate the scope of his statements.

During 2007 Session, Del. Rob Wittman (R-99) introduced bill HB1990 to prevent the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) from making the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) mandatory in Virginia. Indiana, Wisconsin and Michigan have already made premises registration, the first step of NAIS, mandatory, and the USDA maintains efforts towards mandatory.

The NAIS is a program created by the USDA that, if implemented according to the bureaucrats' intent, would require every farm or residence where a single farm animal of any kind is kept to register for a Premises Identification number in a national database; then require every animal--chick, calf, cow, pet donkey, riding horse, pig, goat, sheep, llama, etc... to have a Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tag or microchip; then require the owners to report all movements of the animals on and off the property (take an animal to the sale barn, give a chicken to your neighbor, take your horse for a trail ride), medical care, births and deaths, to the database managers within 24 hours of each incident under threat of severe penalty including stiff fines (Indiana has a \$25,000 per day per incident fine), confiscation of animals, or both.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been unable to force NAIS as a federal program because of massive opposition from farmers and consumers, so now USDA awards enormous grants to state Departments of Agriculture that require the states to register as many farms and premises as possible. This is the first, crucial step of their plan.

With grants of almost \$500,000 from USDA this year, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) has aggressively advertised NAIS in magazines, journals, farm publications, and at feed stores; they have prominent NAIS booths at fairs, livestock "educational" seminars, Extension Agent "talks," they heavily promote NAIS on their website, and are conducting extensive research on using RFID technology at livestock markets. They are also trying to recruit "industry leaders" to be advocates for NAIS in Virginia. In VDACS' "Cooperative Agreement" with the USDA they state, "These funds may only be used for the implementation and administration of premises registration...that promote the NAIS implementation plan for achieving full participation by 2009." "Full" means 100%. Since there will not be—and I guarantee this—"full" voluntary participation, the only way to achieve that goal is by making it mandatory.

Del. Orrock states, "These practices are required in order to sell animals to certain foreign countries and to certain breeders." This is untrue. The USDA's Export Verification Program has been providing this service for years and continues to provide it. Orrock also says, "Many of Virginia's large producers have stated that they need to be able to participate in this program [for source and age verification]." Again, untrue. On CattleNetwork.com—a large producer information website—an article of April 9, 2007 states, "It is important to understand that source and age verification is not part of the National Animal Identification System."

Del. Orrock stated, "[Wittman's] legislation, as introduced, would have banned all Virginia farmers from participating, thereby excluding Virginia products from many Asian and European markets." This is disproved above, and in addition, any farmer in the country can register his premises directly with the national database in Ft. Collins Colorado. VDACS is not needed.

Finally Orrock says, "With the prior knowledge of the sponsor of the bill, the committee then voted to table the bill and to ask the Secretary of Agriculture to work to resolve the issue by next year." In fact, after Del. Wittman revised the wording of the bill to address unfounded objections by the Farm Bureau, Orrock *still refused to allow the committee to vote on it*. Rather than let his bill be twisted into meaning the opposite of its intent, Del. Wittman graciously agreed to withdraw the bill.

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