National Livestock Identification Scheme (NLIS)
A producer's perspective

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Session 2e

The following perspective on NLIS has been formed from my involvement in the scheme over the last 2 years as manager of an EU accredited cow herd of around 3300 breeders on "Wallamumbi" Station, about 50km east of Armidale. Our aim at "Wallamumbi" is to turn off yearling feeder steers, at our annual on-property sale, for finishers to take onto a variety of markets including the EU market.

The first question that comes to mind at the moment regarding NLIS is should it become mandatory for all cattle?

My views may not represent those of the Feeder Steer School organising committee but I firmly believe that it should not be mandatory, but I also believe that **if you're a serious cattle producer you can not afford to turn your back on the scheme**. Without being derogatory towards anyone in our industry I believe, that while NLIS is not overly complicated, its on farm administration is still beyond the capabilities of some of our producers and will therefore be a very large burden and will add significantly to the cost of production for these businesses if imposed on them. I would also suggest that we don't yet have reliable enough hardware and software to make the scheme mandatory.

Having said that, I believe there are two very good reasons for implementing NLIS on your cattle herd. They are increased market access and improved management efficiency on farm.

Market Access

If it's good enough for the Europeans then all of our markets deserve the assurance (traceability) that comes with NLIS.

At the moment we only have one market, and a small one at that, which requires NLIS. This is the EU market and we must not forget that without NLIS/EID we (Northerners) are now also restricting our access into Victoria where it has become mandatory. I envisage that over the next few years we will see more of our international markets asking for traceable lifetime ID.

It is my opinion however that if you are using NLIS only to gain access to the EU market you are probably better off financially to drop your accreditation and NLIS and make use of HGP's instead.

I don't like to use the word "Premiums" but rather what is the reward of going this extra step (NLIS)?

There are three types of rewards, extra income, cost savings and long term security. The EU market does offer extra income from time to time, which is mostly due to availability. If a large percentage of cattle were EU accredited would there still be a premium? Or would the non-accredited (non-NLIS) cattle be getting discounted? I believe that in the future it will be the latter.

Cost savings will be outlined below, but by long-term security I mean that we are firstly securing market access and then the security our industry will have if we have happy and safe consumers. The Rumen bolus version of lifetime EID also offers the only real form of security we have against stock theft and I would suggest that it is worthwhile from this perspective alone.

Management

Electronic individual ID has improved the operating efficiency (cost savings) on "Wallamumbi" to the point where I would suggest that this is where the real benefits of NLIS lie.

By using NLIS on "Wallamumbi" we are able to trace the movements, performance, pedigree, breeding, treatments and total history of every individual beast on the property. To do this with a paper trail, instead of electronically, on up to 7,000 head at a time, would be a nightmare that would have a very large labour cost and questionable accuracy. But with EID and the correct hardware and software it is very efficient and adds little extra labour costs compared with the alternative. We have access to all the information we need at the touch of a button. The on farm EID software program can also incorporate your QA system which will save a lot of time and make record keeping much easier.

As an example we can scan a cow at AI time, retrieve her pedigree, choose a bull and select him on the scanner, when the EID is applied to the resulting calf so is the link to the sire and dam. Every time the calf is weighed it is scanned and this information collected automatically, and in theory when it is killed it is scanned and the resulting slaughter/carcase information can then be downloaded into the on farm system and we could, for example, then analyse a sires/ dams genetic value to our program. The above has probably taken 2 minutes extra per beast;

imagine what it would take with pen and paper and then having to transfer it into a usable/ meaningful report. For the 2 minutes and $4.00 (EID tag cost) you have an unprecedented amount of information at your fingertip about your cattle's performance and also their whereabouts and status (i.e. chemical). Without this sort of information are you able to make sound business decisions?

Software and Hardware

The software and hardware involved in NLIS is the biggest cost and the biggest headache. I would say that both are still only in the development stage and much more work is need by the manufacturers to improve their reliability, efficiency and cost. With this said it would make it very hard to make a system mandatory when the software and hardware are not yet fully ready.

There are still some teething problems with the Database (MLA) also. We cannot yet view our whole herd on the database due to the size of the report, but with smaller herds this may not be the case. Overall though MLA are very helpful with any queries regarding the database and your use of this facility.

At "Wallamumbi" we are using EID ear buttons with a corresponding ear tag, a hand held reader and a PC with one of the "off the shelf" software programs. This setup is working well but is not yet ideal. The software program is vital and it pays to spend the time to find one that suits your needs and computer competency. Equipment like scanners may be shared by neighbours etc. I would suggest before you implement NLIS or just on farm EID that you talk with a number of businesses who are using it and learn from their initial mistakes.

Don't be afraid of change, we must continue to progress our industry and NLIS is now part of our future.

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Western Vic breeder, Mark Gubbins, "Coolana" Angus extols the virtues of his integrated electronic tag system. This utilises Allflex tags, a stick reader interfacing with Rudd scales and Herdmagic recording program. Mark says, "In the first year we put in 1,200 tags at marking, with only one loss and one not reading. As well as the benefits of quick and accurate performance recording, our cattle care and EU accreditation initiatives are much easier when managing mobs re withholding periods etc. I'm now confident to leave new staff in charge of recording - previously there would often be misread tags and wrongly recorded data."