TESTIMONY OF

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Concerning
The National Animal Identification System

Before:
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Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy, and Poultry

House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Emerging Threats, Cybersecurity, Science and Technology

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Chairman Scott, Chairwoman Clarke, Ranking Member Neugebauer, Ranking Member Lundgren and Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to testify before your Committees this afternoon. My name is David Smith and I serve as Assistant State Veterinarian for the State of New York. Prior to becoming Assistant State Veterinarian, I worked for18 years as a veterinarian in USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service and USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. Currently, I have responsibility for oversight of animal identification activities in my state's Department of Agriculture and Markets.

Many people across the US think of Manhattan Island when New York State is mentioned, but with 36,600 farms operating on 7.1 million acres of land, New York is most definitely an agricultural state. The 5,700 dairy farms in New York produced nearly 12½ billion pounds of milk in 2008, making us the number three dairy state. Livestock production of all kinds generally contributes over 2 billion dollars a year to our state's economy. New York has a big stake in safeguarding animal health in the United States.

My agency, the Division of Animal Industry, is part of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets and is responsible for protecting and improving the health of livestock and other animal species in New York. Our veterinarians, animal health inspectors and support staff work every day to prevent and control animal disease and are on the front lines when livestock disease outbreaks occur in our state.

Under the leadership of our State Veterinarian, Dr. John Huntley, New York developed groundbreaking programs such as our New York State Cattle Health Assurance Program, which helps cattle producers adopt best practices to protect the health, welfare, and productivity of their herds. We have a unique program for Avian Influenza surveillance and control that has done a remarkable job of reducing the threat of a catastrophic influenza outbreak in commercial poultry flocks in the Eastern US.

As our vets and inspectors perform their duties, one of the most important tools they must have is an effective system of animal identification. Effective animal ID is the key to every animal disease investigation, the key to assuring the health status of animals when they move interstate or internationally, and the key to minimizing the impact of serious disease outbreaks when they occur. This is why my agency participates in USDA's National Animal Identification System and why we also have our own state program.

Although both programs share the common goal of protecting animal health, there are a few differences in approach.

The New York Department of Agriculture and Markets recognizes that everyday livestock ID methods must fit into existing herd and flock management schemes. Right now, dairies are selling milk at prices lower than the cost of production. In New York and many other states an increasing number of farms strive to meet the growing demand for food from local and community-based agriculture. Government must be mindful not to create regulations or requirements that push struggling farms over the edge or that smother small farms as they endeavor to satisfy consumers' desire for food from a local source.

We appreciate the strengths of technologies like Radio Frequency Identification Devices and we encourage the use of advanced ID technologies whenever it makes sense for the livestock owner, but we also value the cost effectiveness of the official metal eartag. Metal ear tags have been the backbone of animal ID in New York and other states for generations. They generally work well and are well accepted by most of our food animal industry. Thanks to standardization put in place decades ago, they are recognized across the US as acceptable official ID. We can acquire metal tags for about 6 cents per tag, making it possible to provide them to farmers, veterinarians, livestock markets and livestock dealers at no cost. The problem we currently have is that due to the success of programs to eradicate tuberculosis and brucellosis, fewer animals receive official tests or vaccinations and as a result fewer receive the official ID tags that would have been applied at the time of a herd test or vaccination. The rising proportion of animals without official ID slows down disease investigations and increases the risk of serious damage to New York farms and animal agriculture industries when disease outbreaks occur.

It is important to realize that the increase in animals without official ID comes at a time when the speed of commerce is rapidly increasing. Thanks to our interstate highways, livestock can travel coast to coast in three days. Animal products are traded globally. And the current H1N1 influenza situation reminds us that people travel the world more quickly than ever before. This speed of commerce combined with the fact that Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) and other serious livestock diseases are endemic in many countries around the world means that US farmers, veterinarians and animal health officials must always be alert for the possible introduction of these diseases. We must also be ready to respond. Should FMD or another serious animal disease appear in the US, the ability of state governments and the federal government to quickly control it will

hinge on how fast we can identify infected animals, and trace out exposed animals. Studies estimate that the financial damage caused by an outbreak such as FMD can be reduced by many billions of dollars if a viable animal ID and tracing program is in place. Such a program can work only if supported by an efficient record keeping system.

Since the early 20th century, my agency has handled the need for maintaining basic health information on animal herds by keeping paper records in file folders. Although I am continually amazed by how quickly some of our staff can retrieve such records, no one flipping through file folders is a match for the searching power and versatility that can be achieved with a well built and maintained electronic database. Transitioning from paper to electronic records is a logical progression to improve efficiency and effectiveness. We support NAIS's goals to create standards for such databases and we hope the federal government will continue to help states as we modernize these record keeping systems.

Along with the utility of electronic recordkeeping comes the responsibility to guard the information within such systems. Regardless of what becomes of NAIS, producers' information must be handled as confidential. The New York Department of Agriculture and Markets considers farms and related industries as critical infrastructure and we expect that information pertaining to farms and food producers will be afforded strong protection.

The last point I'd like to mention is the cost of non-participation. If significant proportions of livestock owners do not participate in NAIS or some similar program to improve animal ID, then animal disease outbreaks will take longer to control. In the face of such outbreaks, the cascading results could be as simple as a few farms not being able to resume operations quickly or as complex as multi-state eradication efforts and the loss of significant export markets costing billions of dollars.

I thank the committees for this opportunity and in conclusion I wish to say that from my perspective, NAIS and similar programs are about protecting agriculture in the US. When a disaster such as a serious disease outbreak strikes, government will have to act to stop the disease, and reopen markets. If we are to do this task well, we need sound animal identification and information systems.