

# Living with Pig Traceability

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You raise swine. For generations your family has done so, long having girded itself against the vagaries of the marketplace and intuitively synchronized with the ebb and flow of the pork cycle. Times have been good and you've ridden the export horse with your peers as Canada has wrested an ever-increasing percentage of the international marketplace.

In recent years, however, a greater complexity has gripped the social, political, climatic, animal health, human health, domestic and international commercial environments within which you must function. Literal and figurative storm clouds, the likes of those never seen in your father's day, gather from time to time from across these myriad issues to threaten your simple pursuit of a viable profit margin.

Challenges surround you like the layers of a babushka doll. Those that emerge within your barn you are confident you can address by yourself or with the limited assistance of technical experts. Problems that reside within your area, you can handle through collaboration with your peers and local government. In issues at the provincial level, you feel less empowered, entrusting them to your Provincial Board and Provincial Government.

The resolution of threats that emerge at the national level, you entrust to the Canadian Pork Council and Federal Government and the leverage they gain through collaboration with the provinces. Those that threaten from beyond Canada's borders you entrust to the Federal Government and the alliances it has struck on a continental, hemispheric and global basis.

You've come to realize, over time, that distant events hold more sway over your profit margin than your dad would have ever imagined. This reflects your increasing dependence, however indirect, on the rest of the world for the maintenance of some semblance of stability in your marketplace.

The more you think about it, the more you realize that your herd and its challenges are nothing less than a microcosm of the world experience. A

common theme transcends issues affecting these two polar extremes and every babushka layer in between. At the hands of these threats, during the last decade the following scenario has emerged at every jurisdictional level.

In the calm that precedes the storm, there exists a comfortable, predictable equilibrium and things are good. Significant, precipitous change then occurs within one or more of the seven environments described above. An electrical fire in your barn. A local flood. A provincial ice storm. An abrupt rise in the dollar. An Asian economic collapse. Word gets out. The population of the affected jurisdiction reacts and responds.

However veiled, reactions and responses are often self-serving, as individuals and institutions safeguard their primary interests. The Netherlands' "night of lights" comes to mind. On the other hand, as influenced by personal values, their peers or government, groups at all levels do unite in such circumstances to protect the common good. Irrespective of the divergent motives that drive them, responses employ a series of technical supports and may devastate more than the events to which they react.

We investigate the scenario first in terms of your own herd. It could surround the expression of intestinal or respiratory distress following receipt of new animals or feed. As owner, you would respond by seeking immediate clarification of the problem, its origin and the method of its containment. You would search out guidance on picking up the pieces upon its elimination. The supporting cast to which you would turn could include a veterinarian and laboratory, a feed specialist, a dead stock collector and a steam jenny operator. You might have to pull in family members for a short while to help wrestle the situation to the ground. In the meantime, you might have to temporarily reduce or curtail shipments.

As unpalatable as your task might be, it would be facilitated technically by the judicious records you had kept and the identifiers, on both animal and feed entries that punctuated and enabled them. With knowledge as to their dates of entry into a system that had been in ostensible equilibrium, you would be empowered to pinpoint the most probable feed or animal source of your grief. With your herd members identified - and located by pen or lot - you could tailor your interventions by age or other grouping and the apparent lot-specific response to treatment.

You would have in your hands the identifying facts to drive discussion of the issue and the distribution of responsibilities around it. Were you able to achieve resolution on a personal basis, you would do so, only yielding to third party intervention as necessary. If and when bankers, lawyers and judges became involved, continuity of identification and location would play a major role as witnessed in the fallout of other major disease occurrences.

Albeit at a macro scale, the same scenario describes the circumstances that surround the entry of foreign animal diseases into national herds. Governments and swine associations, with motivation not unlike your own, seek to establish at that macro level the same facility of response that supports your within herd approach. That is why CPC and the Provincial Boards have so significantly raised the visibility of national swine identification and premises geo-referencing in the last five years.

Do they stand alone in their chase? No. Canada's other livestock sectors are either already on board with their own identification programs or en route. Is Canada out on a limb compared to the rest of the world in its frenetic pace to identify the national herd? No. Europe is several steps ahead. Australia, New Zealand and others are keeping pace. The United States has established a National Identification Work Plan that advocates a premises identification system for swine by July 2004 and individual or lot identification for animals by July 2005. Other trading nations are working to catch up. The Office International des Epizooties, the international veterinary organization to which the World Trade Organization defers in issues of animal health and trade, dedicated a recent edition of its Scientific and Technical Review to the global issue.

What are the implications for you of a nationally identified swine herd? It becomes the classical issue of surrendering a bit of the autonomy that made you who you are, in deference to the broader interest of your sector and animal agribusiness and, ultimately and however circuitously, your own operation. It's the same issue of private versus public interest that permeates Canadian society, with the Charter of Rights thrown in for good measure. It's the plowing of the highway that in the longer term facilitates your transport but in the short term may block your driveway.

Strip away all the trappings and it comes down to this: Your sector, with its best interests and those of animal agribusiness in mind, and acting in good faith on the basis of its environmental scan, has committed to uniformly identifying the national swine herd. Is it setting off into uncharted waters? No. With the conservatism that characterizes your industry, it is holding forums, workshops, assessing other nations' approaches and embarking on pilot applications.

With funding from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada it will examine, in the interval 2003 - 2005, as many as five different identification approaches. In lot and individual numbering applications, they will be tested throughout the swine production and marketing chain in all its diversity, in Eastern, Central and Western Canada.

Each approach will be assessed in terms of retention and readability and the ease of its capture and transfer. From the database of movements established from the hundreds of herds involved, traceability as enabled by divergent

approaches will be assessed in the face of simulated foreign animal disease invasions. Only after following multiple thousands of swine and months of assessment will the Canadian Pork Council and its collaborators advance the system suggested most favourable under Canadian conditions.

You will be asked to employ the preferred product from that exhaustive study in replacement of, or as an adjunct to, the method you currently apply in your personal management system. You may be asked to contribute information concerning movements to or from your farm to a centralized database. Pursuant to the completely transparent process involved and the inherently conservative nature of your industry, I am convinced that no one will ask more of you than can be rationalized on the basis of its net positive contribution to safeguarding your sector and your livelihood.

From the viewpoint of animal health, that rationalization respects the crucial roles identification and tracking play in infrastructural preparedness for major animal disease outbreaks. Industry and government are building on ten interrelated fronts to avoid the entry of a disease, limit its impact and rehabilitate in its wake. Identification and tracking contribute to three of the initiatives underway. They will facilitate delimitation of the occurrence, so as to direct limited resources to the fire instead of the smoke. They will make the elimination task more efficient. Perhaps most important of all, they will support the creation of zoning boundaries, like bulkheads on a ship, to confine the outbreak and its trade-restrictive impacts to one or two of the compartments created.

From the viewpoint of food quality and safety, the system created will support HACCP approaches enacted throughout the food production, processing and distribution chain. From the viewpoint of consumers, your sector through its identification and tracking effort will have at long last responded to the singular question posed to AAFC's National Animal Health Program Review in 1986. "Why," asked the Consumers Association of Canada at the time, "can you not trace the food we eat to the farms where it was produced?"

*"But at what cost?"*, you reply. The answer lies with your sector's leadership, as they collaborate with Provincial and Federal Governments to ensure creation of an identification and tracking system that meets the minimal standards required to serve both domestic needs and the expectations of the international trading community. Cost-effectiveness being the watchword of your CPC and Provincial Board representatives, I have every confidence that the system you are asked to live with will deliver full value at a fair market price.