

**RESOLUTION NUMBER: 21      APPROVED**

**SOURCE:                      COMMITTEE ON CATTLE AND BISON**

**SUBJECT MATTER:          Ultrahigh Frequency Backtags**

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**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

In 2019, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) announced the availability of \$1 million in cooperative agreement funding to support animal disease traceability and electronic identification for cattle. Funded projects were to gather real-world data and document how to link ultrahigh frequency (UHF) backtags with other identification devices to collect animal movement and disease program data while still maintaining the speed of commerce in high-volume, fast-paced environments.

The Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC), Texas Cattle Feeders Association (TCFA), and a team of vendors and cooperators were awarded funds supporting a project using UHF backtags in place of paper backtags. The project included livestock markets, order buying facilities, feedlots, and slaughter plants, with tag data integrated with the facilities' existing software systems when requested. Permanent identification devices (eartag) were applied at some order buyers and feedlots and linked to UHF backtags. These data were transmitted to the technology vendor, forwarded to TAHC and imported to the TAHC database. Key data points were then shared with USDA's Animal Health Event Repository through an automated interface, thereby enhancing nationwide traceability of both feeder cattle and breeding cattle.

Evaluation of tag performance demonstrated retention and read rates over 99% consistently in all markets and environments, showing that while temporary, UHF backtags are as reliable for short term usage as any other currently used form of official identification in cattle in the United States (US). It further demonstrated that correlation to other forms of identification not easily read at the speed of commerce, such as National Uniform Eartagging System tags, provided the ability to manage those livestock at high rates of speed while maintaining traceability.

The project demonstrated that UHF backtags and eartags can be reliably read using an unattended system at processing plants, providing a critical bookend to tracing individual animals.

The Florida Cattlemen's Association in cooperation with the Florida state veterinarian were also granted funds supporting a UHF backtag project. The Florida project has experienced the same performance and success as the Texas project, demonstrating greater efficiency in tracking cattle through the market. One Florida livestock manager publicly lauded the technology for increasing the speed of commerce from 125-130 animals per hour to 180- 200 animals, while also increasing the speed and accuracy of both paperwork and load out.

The Texas and Florida projects demonstrated that use of UHF backtags tremendously increases the scope of traceability in livestock markets while improving the accuracy, efficiency, and cost effectiveness of collecting key pieces of traceability information and supporting the cattle industry's management and marketing needs. Livestock market operators embrace the use of this technology as it has shown to improve efficiency rather than be a hindrance.

USDA's encouragement of broad use by supplying UHF backtags in livestock markets would directly enhance animal disease traceability and therefore benefit the US cattle industry as a whole.

#### **RESOLUTION:**

The United States Animal Health Association urges the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to approve, fund and supply ultrahigh frequency backtags, without reducing animal disease traceability cooperative agreement funds, to states for use in USDA approved livestock markets committed to using this technology in their facilities and sharing associated information electronically with their state for submission into the Animal Health Event Repository.

#### **INTERIM RESPONSE:**

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Veterinary Services (VS) recognizes the concerns of the United States Animal Health Association (USAHA) and appreciates the opportunity to respond.

In 2019, APHIS provided one-time funding in support of three pilot projects to evaluate the use of ultra-high frequency (UHF) backtags in livestock markets. Due to challenges associated with COVID-19, all three projects were delayed by at least 1 year, and two of three projects were delayed for a second year with anticipated completion by early 2023. Cooperators in the pilots have initially reported that the UHF back tags facilitated movement of cattle with less time and labor, thus saving money in operational costs for the livestock market, and for the buyers and sellers of cattle. The UHF radio-frequency identification (RFID) back tags are also reported to further enhance the recordkeeping and documentation required under USDA traceability regulations while moving cattle at the speed of commerce. Final reports on the projects are forthcoming and we intend to use the lessons learned to help inform future decisions.

At this time, APHIS has not budgeted for additional funding for widespread purchase and distribution of the UHF RFID back tags in fiscal year 2022. However, we encourage livestock markets to use the UHF backtags if beneficial to their operation.