

In search of technology for animal ID

THE National Animal ID System is "supposed to be technology neutral," says the Illinois Department of Agriculture's Jim Kunkle. So far so good.

According to the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's initial tag manufacturing and distribution guidelines issued for swine and cattle on March 3, any tags must be tamper evident and printed with U.S. shield and a 15-digit animal identification number readable from within 30 inches.

While this is an obvious relief to producers who have yet to computerize their farms and don't want to invest in RFID tags and readers, it is perhaps a bigger relief for groups like the Amish whose beliefs preclude many forms of technology.

In Illinois, NAIS tagging requirements stand not only to impact the state's Amish farmers, but also Amish-owned meat and poultry processors, including Illinois' only downstate USDA poultry processing plant in Arthur.

Another point of contention with the NAIS is who will have access to the NAIS data. As it now stands, the data will be collected into species data-bases.

USDA is still exploring methods for protecting farmers' data. Says Doug O'Brien with the Drake University Ag Law Center, "Congress is considering legislation that requires that the data be kept confidential."

Least you think that USDA is not protective of its data, consider that for its premise registration mailing, IDOA relied upon a secure list from the National Agricultural Statistics Service. "Our mailing was done with the list, but they don't let us actually have access to it," explains IDOA's Kunkle.

They said it

"In the United Kingdom, they estimated that if they could have shut down foot-and-mouth within 48 hours, it could have decreased the number of animals they had to slaughter by 70%."

Jim Kunkle, IDOA

"There definitely is some growing concern that certain groups of stakeholders haven't felt as involved in the process."

Dore Mobley, USDA-APHIS

Retiring educator watches interest in agriculture grow

By **TIM ALEXANDER**

WHEN Russ Leman retires from his position as agriculture instructor for Roanoke-Benson High School in Woodford County this year, he will do so with mixed emotions.

"I'm not necessarily ready to retire; I still enjoy what I'm doing and still enjoy coming to work. But, I guess it's time to step aside and let in some younger blood," says Leman, 54, who will be calling it quits after 28 years at R-B (and 34 years in all) next month.

In those 34 years at R-B and other nearby schools, Leman has served as instructor and often as mentor to thousands of agriculture students and instructors.

Along the way, Leman has borne witness to the "salad" days of ag education in the 1970s and a downturn in funding and enrollment in the '80s and early '90s. He's also been part of a recent resurgence in both funding and interest that has helped boost ag education in a state where one-fourth of the workforce is in ag-related occupations.

More opportunity today

During his career, Leman has also witnessed changes in technology, teaching styles and a re-examination of what ag education means.

"There are so many opportunities these days for students in agriculture," Leman says. "Agriculture is not just about how to grow corn or soybeans; there were a whole lot of people involved in coming up with the technology for hybrid seed to begin with."

Of the 175 kids enrolled at R-B, nearly half take Leman's ag classes and a third are FFA

Key Points

- Woodford County teacher has seen ag education change.
- Illinois has more openings than candidates for ag ed positions.
- Ag education has become more business focused.

members. Several years ago, he and his students built a greenhouse for their horticulture program, and today they also operate an aquaculture tank, raising hundreds of tilapia from eggs each year. They round out each year with a fish fry.

"I can already see that I'm going to miss the students," says Leman, who has four children of his own. "I really enjoy when they come back to visit with me after graduation and let me know what they're up to."

Technology change

The dozens of plaques and ribbons hanging on a wall of Leman's classroom stand as silent testimony to the successful relationships he has forged with his students through the years.

Leman says that while the students themselves haven't changed much over the years, their options and access to information has.

"Students have increased access to technology such as computers, the Internet, media. It makes them, in a lot of ways, much more knowledgeable."

Much of the change in ag education during his career has been in the way ag-related courses and occupational choices are taught and presented, Leman says.

"When I started, ag education was pretty much a production curriculum: crops, livestock and mechanics.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Nearly half of all the kids at Roanoke-Benson High School take Russ Leman's ag classes.

Everything you taught revolved around those three areas. Now we've moved towards a business-management curriculum, and fewer students are going back to their farms. They're managing fertilizer, chemical or feed plants, or are employed in other ag-related businesses," Leman explains.

Teaching mentor

Steve Kiesewetter, agriculture teacher for Metamora High School, says he considers Leman a mentor. Kiesewetter student-taught under Leman, where he gained a better understanding of curriculum and student motivation.

"Mr. Leman was always willing to share his experience to help guide me in the right direction," Kiesewetter says. "I hope that I can accomplish some of the things he has done

while being an agriculture teacher and pass those experiences on to the next generation of teachers, as he did for me."

Leman shies away from being referred to as a mentor.

"I've stolen a lot of ideas and had mentors of my own," Leman says with a smile. "But the older you get, I guess you do become more of a mentor."

Alexander writes from Peoria Heights.

By the numbers: Ag education in Illinois

26,000	Number of Illinois high school students enrolled in ag curricula in 2005
56%	Percent of ag ed students who are urban
34%	Percent of ag ed students who are female
16%	Percent of ag ed students who grew up on family farms
6%	Percent of ag ed students who are minorities
73%	Percentage of schools in Illinois that offer leadership development through FFA activities
80%	Percent of graduating ag ed students who go on to college
39	Average age of an Illinois ag teacher
23%	Percent of Illinois ag teachers who are women
\$44,581	Average annual salary of a full-time ag ed teacher in Illinois

SOURCE: FACILITATING COORDINATION IN AG EDUCATION

Illinois representative pushes for ag education

ILLINOIS State Rep. Don Moffitt is passionate about agricultural education — so much so that he's sponsored House Bill 4986, designed to define the state's burgeoning ag education program and ensure FFA a presence in the classroom. The bill also defines three essential criteria a school's ag program would have to meet in order to be accredited. At press time, the bill had passed both houses unanimously and awaits the governor's signature.

"The wealth of Illinois lies in her comprehensive agricultural industry and future strength lies in agricultural youth leadership development," Moffitt said during a speech to the Illinois Leadership Council for Agricultural Education, which recently acknowledged the Knoxville farmer and former educator with its annual legislative award.

"The intent is for FFA not to be viewed just as an extracurricular activity, but as an integral part of an agriculture education program," added Moffitt. "I truly consider FFA to be one of the most outstanding youth leadership development organizations in the state and the nation. Students who have been members of FFA programs gain self-confidence and self-esteem and often develop into future leaders in our communities."

And although Gov. Rod Blagojevich announced earlier this year that he would not increase the line item for ag education in fiscal year 2007, Moffitt remained upbeat.

"In tough economic times, to be able to preserve a line item is a win," he said.



MOFFITT