

Ovine and caprine animals: date of introduction of electronic identification

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Experience gained during the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease highlighted the need to establish a traceability system for sheep, as is currently the case for bovine animals. Current legislation specifies that sheep and goats must be identified according to a system for the identification and registration of ovine and caprine animals (Regulation (EC) No 21/2004). This system includes four main elements: identifiers; a holding register; a movement document; and a computerised database. Under the terms of this system, the obligatory introduction of electronic identification is scheduled for 1 January 2008. Prior to the adoption of this obligation, however, the Commission is required to report to the Council on the implementation of the electronic identification system. The purpose of this report is to describe the current situation on electronic identification and to consider the feasibility, or not, of obligatory introduction of electronic identification for sheep and goats in the EU as from 1 January 2008.

To recall, Community rules on the identification and registration of sheep and goats was intended to allow for the individual traceability of sheep and goats through their lifetime. Implementation is to be taken in two steps. Firstly, all animals born after 9 July 2005 have to be identified individually with a visible ear tag in combination with a second identifier bearing the same code. The latter could be a second ear tag, an electronic identifier and possibly a tattoo or mark on the pastern. Secondly, the individual animal codes should be linked to the movement of information. Thus, the movement document and the holding should contain the individual codes of the animals. This needs to be linked to the date on which obligatory electronic identification is to be introduced. Until this date has been approved only the number of animals are recorded and not their individual animal codes.

For the implementation of electronic identification the Commission has adopted some implementing Decision that form the technical basis and guidelines for interoperability between devices from different manufacturers. The Commission has also adopted measures to approve the electronic identifiers.

In preparing this report, the Commission invited the Member State to provide information on their experience on implementing the Regulation – either on a voluntary basis or on pilot projects of electronic identification. In addition, the Commission examined and analysed the results from its own large scale project on livestock electronic identification (IDEA). Given the variation in scientific goals, the results can not always be compared.

This report, however, offers a summary of the results in more general terms. The main findings of the report are as follows:

- Tracing individual animal movements via different holdings required the recording of individual animal data for each movement. Electronic systems ensure that automatic reading and recording of individual animal data, especially for small ruminants, which are often moved in large numbers and sometimes via markets or assembly centres where the composition of these groups changes.
- Electronic reading systems are dispensable when individual animal codes can be read visually and recorded manually or in the case of group identification.
- Community legislation should not promote the use of one particular technical solution in order to take account of differing management and environmental conditions in the Member States. Community legislation already fixed the basic technical standards and the Commission's role to broker a common approach and agreed Community standards is crucial. The establishment of a Community Reference Laboratory (CRL) may need to be considered.
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The Member States should be allowed to approve new types of identifiers (such as electronic mark on the pastern, injectable transponders) on condition that the maximum period for tagging is respected and that each type of identifier is kept out of the food chain.

- The basic technical conditions to identify small ruminant in their holding of birth, with electronic identification, has been fulfilled. However, the date of obligatory introduction should consider the time-frame needed for the Member States to carry out the necessary legal and organisational arrangements before that date.
- Experience, in some Member States, shows that considerable investments in reading technology of higher performance placed in the whole production chain is essential for the functioning of the system.
- Successive electronic tagging of young animals in their holding of birth will lead to a situation where animals with or without electronic identifiers will have to be managed together during an introduction period. The Commission, therefore, intends to disassociate the date from which the movement information containing individual animal codes from the date of obligatory electronic identification.

For the reasons outlined above, the Commission concludes that at this stage it would not be possible to justify a decision regarding setting a final date for the obligatory introduction of electronic identification at Community level. It recommends the commissioning of a wider stakeholder discussion and preparing a report on the economic impact of introducing obligatory electronic tagging. The setting of a new date will be agreed in accordance with the comitology procedure. The Commission envisages the establishment of such a date in 2008 with a view to the implementation of electronic identification system in all EU Member States by the end of 2009. The legal framework should allow the Member States to implement electronic identification according to their national needs.