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FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT: Shane Kolb, 605-244-7145; Judith McGeary, FARFA, 512-243-9404; DeJon Bakken, 701-376-3333; Jeri Lynn Bakken, WORC staff, 701-376-7077; or Kevin Dowling, WORC staff, 406-252-9672

Conference Committee trims animal identification program budget

Billings, Mont. – Groups representing independent livestock producers hail a cut in funding by Congress for a controversial animal identification program as a move in the right direction.

A conference committee report on the Agricultural Appropriations bill, issued September 30, allocates \$5.3 million for the National Animal Identification System (NAIS), down nearly two-thirds from the \$14.67 million originally requested by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

“It’s a great first step towards stopping a bad idea,” said rancher DeJon Bakken, a Dakota Resource Council member from Adams County, N.D. “Congress should end funding, period.”

NAIS would identify and track all livestock and poultry animals owned by producers and others across the country. Bakken said NAIS would not be an improvement over existing disease programs run by state agencies, and would simply impose high costs and paperwork burdens on family farmers.

The conference committee noted that USDA has already spent more than \$140 million in funding for NAIS, but has registered only about 37% of the estimated number of properties under the first phase of NAIS.

“There are many sound reasons why the majority of animal owners have rejected the NAIS, despite the USDA’s efforts to sell the program,” said Judith McGeary, a Texas livestock farmer and President of the Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance (FARFA). “The bottom line is that NAIS will not improve animal health or food security.”

The reduced level of funding is expected to end USDA’s distribution of grants to state agencies and private organizations to promote NAIS.

“The USDA still has money to propose the rules for the animal identification program, but ranchers will have an opportunity to influence those rules,” said South Dakota rancher Shane Kolb with the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC). “This cut indicates a lack of confidence in the program.”

Based in Billings, Mont., WORC is a network of conservation and family agriculture organizations in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

FARFA advocates for farmers, ranchers, and homesteaders through public education and lobbying to assure their independence in the production and marketing of their food, and to prevent the imposition of unnecessary regulatory burdens that are not in the public interest.