Questions to Ask Technology Providers

There are a growing number of companies providing products and services to assist production agriculture as animal identification is introduced. The following discussion is intended to provide some questions to ask technology providers regarding their products and services.

Questions Regarding Data Collection

Q. Does your system meet the requirements described for the National Animal Identification System?
Q. I have different types of animals in my livestock operation; can your products handle them all?
Q. What types of technology does your system support?
Q. Do I have to carry the computer with me when I am out in the field collecting data?

A technology provider should have their software platforms developed to support any guidelines agreed upon by the livestock industry and the USDA in support of the National Animal ID System (NAIS). You should ask your technology provider if their software is configured to work on multiple hardware devices such as laptops, Personal Digital Assistants, tablet PCs, touch screen monitors (similar to the type utilized in the restaurant industry) or your desktop. Changes in hardware technology are very rapid, so most computer software technology providers have configured their software to work with a variety of hardware devices such as various models of EID readers, scales, barcode readers, thermometers, etc.

It is very important that the technology provider with whom you choose to work supports the species (cattle, horses, swine, sheep, cervidae, etc.) on your operation. In order to facilitate the implementation of the NAIS, some of the providers will need to adapt their services to accommodate multi-species applications. The NAIS plan will start with the registration of premises and slowly phase in the individual animals. It is important that your technology provider has the software ability to capture both visual and electronic tag information.

Questions Regarding Data Storage

Q. Where is my data stored?
Q. Will my data be lost?
Q. Can I back up my data when I am working my herd?

Your technology provider should provide details on how your livestock data is stored and maintained. They should also be able to share information about who has access to your data, where it is stored, and how the data is backed up for safe keeping. Almost all systems store your data on your local computer, and most will also have a copy of the same data stored on a server computer that they maintain at a central location or at several locations.

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In addition, the centralized databases should be backed up to a separate, offsite storage system to be used in case of a catastrophic event such as a fire, computer failure, tornado, or flood. Most systems will also contain a toolset provided to enable you to save all of your data manually or automatically as your livestock are being processed.

Questions Regarding Data Security

Q. When sending my information, will my data be exposed to hackers?
Q. If I upload data, who will be able to see it?

Technology providers will need to provide an encrypted (coded) method of sending data to a safe storage facility. Therefore, your data is as safe as modern technology allows. Your technology provider will grant control to others who will have access to your data. In some systems no third party will be able to access your information without permission, while in other systems the data is transferred with ownership of the cattle. You need to know how your data is being handled and who is doing the handling.

Questions Regarding Data Access

Q. Can I create reports of my data in the software products I have purchased?
Q. Can I export data collected to Microsoft Excel or other spreadsheet or database applications?
Q. Will I be able to receive carcass information from a packing plant?

Most software products should provide basic reporting from within their applications. In addition, many technology providers have more extensive reporting capabilities accessible from their Internet portals seamlessly integrated with the front-end software product lines. As a producer, you should have the ability to export or transfer data into a spreadsheet format.

Your data can be transferred to other programs and can also be printed in a hard copy format for your files. The NAIS is interested in 48-hour traceback to protect our national herd from a foreign animal disease or other catastrophic disease outbreak only. There are currently many alliances being formed that will be able to help coordinate carcass information back to the producer.

Multiple technology providers will be offering tools to coordinate all types of production information (including carcass data) across all production segments, but these activities will be outside of NAIS activities. It is important to keep in mind that currently most packing plants and carcass/box operations do not have the ability to automatically coordinate live animal ID numbers to individual carcass data. The NAIS, once fully implemented, will provide some of the basic infrastructure needed for the industry to take the next step toward individual carcass data integration.

Questions Regarding Service and Support

Q. Which types of technology do you sell, service and support?
Q. How can I contact your technical support?
Q. What type of training will you provide for me and my employees if I purchase your product?
Q. What do I do if I forget my password?
Q. Where are current installations of your software product line?

As far as technical support, at minimum technology providers should give you a telephone number to call for assistance and their support staff’s hours of operation. You should also be sure to test the software on your operation before you make a substantial investment and begin using it to work livestock. Poor performing software makes for unnecessary costs and a long day at the chute.

Your technology provider should have technical manuals to help troubleshoot and answer questions. It is important to make sure that you know where these manuals are located in the program or in a hardcopy format.

Your technology provider should also provide easy access to your passwords and give you the ability to update or change your password as you desire.

Technology providers should be able to provide you with a contact list of customers who have used their software, hardware, and/or data management services. The early adopters will likely be called upon to provide advice and relay not only their experiences with service providers but also these new tools to other producers.