

What access will government agencies have?



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Oklahoma State University (OSU), through the National Whole Chain Traceability Institute (NWCTI), has developed a traceability system for the beef industry. One of the core components of this system is that entities that enter animal records into the system own those records and control the access to who can view these records. Data owners are provided the ability to share all their information or just a portion of the information for a given animal with whomever they choose. The system uses animal identifications that follows the animal throughout the supply chain. Each firm along the supply chain adds additional information to the animal's records, but the firm that enters the information owns that information and controls access to that information. This granular data level access control was a primary pillar of the traceability software system because beef cattle stakeholders were extremely concerned about who could access the data they entered into the system. Especially concerning for many in the beef industry, is how much access will regulatory agencies have to this data (Figure 1). Common questions our team has received include:

- 1) Will government agencies have direct access to my data?
- 2) Will I be informed if these agencies access my data?
- 3) Will government agencies be able to data mine my information?

In short, the answer to these questions is no. The NWCTI software has been developed under the premise that the individual who enters information into the system is the data owner and has full control of that data. The data owner chooses when and with whom they share their information and can retract the viewing privileges of those they share information with. Government entities have to request access to an individual's data to have viewing privileges. If this individual refuses the request, the agency would then need to follow standard legal procedures, i.e. submit a subpoena, to gain access.



Government agency requests access to beef operator's records



Operator decides whether or not to share their data with the agency.



Figure 1. In the NWCTI traceability system, government agencies would be required to request access from an operator to review their records. The operator can then decide to grant or deny the agency's request to access their information. At this point the government agency must go through legal channels if they still wish to gain access to that operations records. Source: therealside.com

A typical follow-up question from stakeholders after being told they can deny government agencies access to their data is, “doesn’t that defeat the purpose of a traceability system?”. The answer to this question, again, is no. To see why, consider a historical event where a whole chain traceability system would have mitigated economic damage to the beef industry. On December 9, 2003, a single dairy cow was slaughtered. On December 23, 2003 a presumptive diagnosis of mad cow disease was made and the herd to which the cow belonged was placed under a state hold order. One day later, all the beef from the cattle slaughtered in the same facility on the same day as the identified cow were recalled. Additionally, all rendering plants that processed material from these animals placed a voluntary hold on all potentially contaminated products. One month later on January 6, 2004, it was determined that the cow entered the United States from Canada in 2001. This incident cost the beef industry billions.

A whole chain traceability system such as the one developed by OSU and collaborators wouldn’t change the legal procedures, government entities would have to follow to access an individual’s animal records; it would simply speed up the process once it did gain access. Even though it may take government entities time to go through the legal process to obtain a beef operator’s records, it will still reduce the time required to identify an outbreak’s source to days or hours instead of weeks, greatly reducing the short and long term financial losses associated with a disease outbreak or food safety event.

For more information about the NWCTI system, contact Dr. Michael Buser using the information below. YouTube videos related to the NWCTI system can be viewed at <https://goo.gl/MwPhoS>.



Figure 2. Negative publicity cost the beef industry billions in the years after the mad cow incident in 2003/2004. Source: *time.com*



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