Food Traceability: is microchipping really the solution?

By Sophie Chapel (12 February 2013), writing from a protest in the Drôme

French, German and Spanish farmers protesting together in Valence (E. Breteau)

To improve the traceability of meat and dairy products and reduce the risk posed by health crises, the European Union now requires the microchipping of sheep and goats. Small farmers are protesting, standing in the way of what they consider a means of industrialising their husbandry through the imposition, and proposing instead the encouragement of appropriate systems and short supply chains and the use of the infallible method of tattooing for identification. While scandals and fraud taint the food industry and its many intermediaries, it is these farmers who face severe punishment.

"Our sheep already have a numbered tag in each ear. We're drowning in traceability and now they're forcing us to use a microchip. It's not the sheep they want to trace, it's us farmers!" says Ingrid Louis. A sheep farmer in the Drôme, she's been forced to identify electronically all animals born on her farm since July 2010. This obligation will be extended to all adult sheep and goats from July 2013.

A few steps from Ingrid, Laura Charoin proudly sports a T-shirt declaring "unchipped, unsurpressed!" A member of the Drôme farmers' group, she co-organized the "festive transhumance" from Mornans (Drome) to Valence. "Since no-one's listening to us, we're making a noise," says the dairy sheep farmer. She shares other breeders' deep concern "about the future of a society that chips everything, including living things, and that sees its salvation in more and more technology."

Computerised management for the best traceability?

Initiated at the European level in 2005, the reform of sheep and goat identification and traceability was officially intended to "improve the management of health crises related to animal diseases." How? By means of electronic identifiers - transponders, or Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) microchips. Transit passports, such as the Navigo pass, and biometric passports are already equipped with these chips. According to the food administration, sticking an RFID tag in the ear of sheep and goats and enforcing a computerised management of herds would be an ideal way to reduce health risks.

Once stored in the chip readers, the information is sent to the various local livestock agencies that manage and administer the animal identification databases. "But who needs this as traceability, this speed?" asked the activist, Sylvette Escazaux. "Small farmers? No, it is industry that needs to go faster, to follow their tracked product ... Because the industry doesn't raise living things; it manages products." The case of horse meat sold as beef to the food industry only serves to prove that it is not traceability that has been lacking, but rather the lack of care and control by the suppliers and traders of agricultural products.

High-tech Gadgets or appropriate production methods?

"We advance health arguments such as traceability," says Jean-Louis Meurot, breeder of dairy ewes. "But this war against microbes turns out to be a war against our system, where epidemics are exceptional events. Our whole lives are to be ruled by such episodes." For Drôme farmers " it is the intensification of production, international trade and industrialisation that create health risks, not extensive farms." "It is extensive methods which produce good monitoring capacity and quality, not a high-tech gadget!" says one of the farmers.

Most participants in the transhumance didn't become a shepherd or farmer to work behind a screen, or to follow standard procedures concocted by so-called experts. "The goal is to centralise everything in databases but life should not be locked into computer files. We work a lot from empirical or intuitive knowledge," says Jean-Louis. That we don't do things which are contrary to our experience and our way of seeing our job and they shouldn't be imposed on us!" They fear becoming subcontractors of the meat industry and lose all autonomy.

Tags are mandatory; tattoos are infallible

"Improving traceability through a plastic tag, whether electronic or not, does not change anything," said Laura. She already has a book in which she notes at lambing the tag number of the lamb, its sex, date of birth, the number of the mother and any mortality. She sends a copy of this record to the local animal health office. "95% of slaughterhouses in France don't have chip readers, they continue to write down the details by hand," she claims.

Making things easier for farmers is another argument advanced by the Ministry of Agriculture. "That may be so for large farms but not for small flocks," argues Cécile, who has sixty goats. Following an inspection in 2010, she was obliged to introduce electronic identification (EID). "We are not equipped with a chip reader, so we continue to record everything manually." She believes that this obligation is "completely absurd", while the current system of identification - a (non-electronic) tag in each ear is ample for ensuring traceability.

If you really want enhanced traceability, the farmers advocate tattooing, which is tamper-proof, unlike the RFID chip which can be easily be "scrambled if it is subjected to a strong magnetic field field," said the regional office of Confédération Paysanne, a small farmers' union. "All we're asking for it the freedom to choose the best means of caring for and identifying our livestock, as long as the methods we choose are reliable and tried and tested," says Cecilia.

Honest farmers punished

For the moment, the authorities have left Etienne Mabille no choice. On an inspection in April 2012, forty sheep were found to be "in breach", in other words, unchipped. The penalty was not long in coming: loss of the sheep subsidy (€18-20 per head), which then had knock-on effects on other

subsidies (Less-Favoured Area payments, organic farming, supports for grassland farming). The total cost was between €8,000 and €12,000. Etienne requested that the penalties be suspended while an appeal was heard; the request was rejected. The appeal will be decided in a few months. Yet Etienne has never deceived anyone about the origin of either meat or milk...

The case of Stephen Mabille has outraged many farmers. Yvan Delage is one: "Let's look beyond the question of subsidies and the effects of penalties on our farm economies. The effects are much worse than that. Now our animals are considered risk materials because they are not identified electronically. When the slaughterhouses will set no longer take our animals, what can you do?" In response, the head of the Drôme administration has issued a press release stating that "any offender may be subject to administrative and criminal sanctions" including fines of "€150-450 per animal." So while agribusiness and agricultural product traders are doing well, EID is further weakening the position of farms that already find themselves in a precarious situation.

EID: a lucrative market!

Up until July 2013 the French state is subsidising the purchase of electronic tags to the tune of 70 cents for every Euro it costs the farmer. After that, farmers must bear the full cost. Meanwhile, 'classic' tags cost only about 20 cents apiece. To these additional costs must be added those of microchip reader, computer and software. So why develop at such expense a tool which, according to its critics, adds nothing in terms of traceability?

Vincent Delmas, a farmer and spokesperson for the Confédération Paysanne in the Drôme, suggests one answer: "Today, an electronic tag costs €1 each. There are 7.5 million sheep in France and each year over 7.5 million lambs are born. I'll let you do the maths...!" The European Commission estimated in a note on EID that "the European market could rise from €500 million in 2006 to €7 billion in 2016." In 2012, nearly 4 billion EID chips were sold globally, one third up on the previous year.

No recycling planned

Another problem: there are no plans for the collection and recycling of electronic tags. Made from silicon, silver, plastic and copper, the EID tag is not even subject to eco-packaging taxes, says Etienne Mabille. A study by the Pièces et Main d'Oeuvre association estimated the resources needed to

manufacture a 2g tag as: 1.7 kg of fossil fuels, $1m^3$of nitrogen, 72g of chemicals and 32 litres of water. "By comparison, it takes 1.5 tons of fossil fuels to build a car of 750 kg. A ratio of 2 to 1, while it is 630 to 1 for the chip," say the association.

Some farmers also have doubts about the safety of electronic tagging. "The tags are heavier and tighter, increasing the risk of arthritis and sensitivity to electric fields. This seems contrary to animal welfare, which is rightly receiving a high profile these days," they say. Farmers feel they have the right to refuse to have electronic equipment perpetually within 5cm of the brains of their animals."

Chips in human beings next?

"Farming has always been an excellent laboratory for things we then use on humans," notes Yvan Delage. The Drôme have drafted a motion which has received the support of 70 communes seeking a meeting with the Minister of Agriculture to request the removal of EID requirement. Some European countries such as Austria, England and Ireland have delayed or refused the introduction of microchips and kept traditional means of identification, such as tags and tattoos.
In France, several lawsuits against the chipping Electronic farms have been lodged, in Ariège, in the Drôme and in Tarn et Garonne. All of them object to the conduct of their lives and their livestock keeping being made part of automated systems. They reject a society which thinks that trust in farmers can be replaced by EID chips. "We do not need more machines, but more humanity," is how the farmers' association sums up its view. Etienne Malville agrees: "In the end, this chipping is not about farming, it's about the kind of society we want."

A translation by EFNCP of a text on:
http://transhumance.festive.overblog.com/

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