

USDA-APHIS VS UPDATES

Board of Animal Health Quarterly Meeting

September 12, 2026

RFID Tag Distribution Update

Swine RFID Tags

- APHIS recently established a new program providing no-cost HDX RFID eartags to eligible swine producers. APHIS has awarded Merck Animal Health a contract for up to \$20 million in RFID tags over five years, with the program focused on commercial sow and exhibition swine.
- A significant change is the direct-to-premises distribution model. Rather than routing tags through a USDA warehouse, tags will be shipped directly from the manufacturer to eligible producers. This is intended to reduce delays and streamline access to tags.
- Eligible requesters include commercial sow facilities, exhibition swine facilities, and State Animal Health Officials. Producers must have a valid Premises Identification Number (PIN) and provide basic premises and contact information.
- For sow producers, annual tag allocations are based on the number of sows on the premises, with allocations ranging from 500 tags for premises with 1–500 sows to 6,000 tags for premises with 10,000 or more sows. Exhibition swine producers may request tags for all swine on their premises.

Tag Ordering Guidelines

Number of Sows on Premises	Maximum Number of Tags per Year
1–500	500
501–999	750
1,000–4,999	1,500
5,000–9,999	3,000
10,000+	6,000

The number of half duplex (HDX) RFID eartags available each year at no cost through this program varies by group.

- Sow Producers: The maximum number of tags is based on the number of sows at a premises, as shown in the table.
- Exhibition Swine Producers: You may order tags for all swine on your premises.
- State Animal Health Officials (SAHOs): You may request tags for up to 50% of your State's breeding sow population, as reported by USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service.



United States Department of Agriculture

Minnesota Cattle RFID Tags

Minnesota has also received an increased allocation of cattle RFID tags. The Minnesota Board of Animal Health is ordering 135,000 tags and is working in partnership with the local USDA APHIS office to distribute them to producers.

The distribution plan includes:

- 3,000 tags for each livestock market veterinarian to distribute to producers;
- 5,000 tags reserved for the Beef Expo;
- 9,000 tags maintained for smaller producer orders; and
- 61,000 tags designated for larger orders.

This distribution model represents a change from the previous process, in which tags were shipped from the manufacturer to a USDA warehouse and subsequently distributed to producers. Under the updated process, tags are shipped from the manufacturer directly to the state, allowing Minnesota and USDA to coordinate distribution locally.

Classical Scrapie Detection – Oregon

- USDA APHIS confirmed classical scrapie in a sheep slaughtered in Oregon in July 2026. The case was identified through routine slaughter surveillance.
- This is a reminder that classical scrapie remains present in the U.S., despite substantial reductions in disease prevalence through the National Scrapie Eradication Program (NSEP).
- Scrapie is a fatal, degenerative disease of sheep and goats and can be difficult to detect because infected animals may appear healthy for an extended period.
- Slaughter surveillance remains an important component of the national eradication strategy, helping identify cases that may not have been detected through clinical observation.
- APHIS and Oregon are conducting appropriate follow-up and trace activities associated with the detection.
- The case reinforces the importance of continued sheep and goat identification, traceability, and surveillance.
- Accurate official identification is particularly important when a positive animal is identified and trace investigations are necessary.

APHIS continues to encourage sheep and goat producers to participate in identification and scrapie surveillance activities. APHIS is also promoting electronic identification to improve the ability to rapidly trace exposed or affected animals.



United States Department of Agriculture

Impact on "Scrapie-Free" Status

Delayed timeline: The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) requires seven years without a case to declare a country scrapie-free. New target date: Because of this new case, the U.S. goal of reaching scrapie-free status by January 2028 is pushed back to around 2033.

Foreign Animal Disease Diagnostician (FADD) Training Update

- Foreign Animal Disease Diagnosticians (FADDs) are state and federal veterinarians trained to recognize, investigate, and collect diagnostic samples from animals potentially affected by foreign animal diseases.
- Traditionally, FADD training was conducted as a two-week, in-person course at Plum Island, New York.
- In recent years, the training transitioned to:
 - One week of virtual instruction, followed by
 - One week of hands-on training at Plum Island.
- The last Plum Island training course was held in 2025 as USDA continues the transition of foreign animal disease diagnostic activities to the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF) in Manhattan, Kansas.

2026 Training Approach

- During the laboratory transition, two FADD courses will be offered in 2026/27.
- The virtual portion of the training will continue.
- The hands-on portion will be conducted in Ames, Iowa, rather than Plum Island.
- The Ames training will provide veterinarians with practical experience in foreign animal disease sampling, diagnostic procedures, and field investigation techniques.
- Because the training is no longer being conducted at a facility where trainees can observe actual disease progression, video-based materials have been developed to demonstrate clinical signs and disease progression.

Looking Ahead

- Once the transition to NBAF is complete, USDA plans to return to a more comprehensive in-person FADD training model.
- The interim Ames-based model provides continued training capacity while maintaining the hands-on component that is critical for preparing veterinarians to respond to suspected foreign animal disease introductions.



United States Department of Agriculture

USDA Hiring Update

Recent Staffing Changes

- Dr. Rachel Baniecke hired as a Field Veterinary Medical Officer (VMO), covering Albany, Minnesota.
- Dr. Olivia Perkins hired as a Field VMO, covering Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- Dr. Steve Just hired as the Emergency Coordinator; anticipated start date is October 4, 2026.
- Mike Fier, a Veterinary Services employee for nearly 30 years, retired in February 2026.

Current Vacancies / Recruitment

- Two Program Assistant positions will need to be backfilled.
- One Epidemiologist position remains vacant and will be recruited.
 - The position will be advertised under the current classification as a Field Operations Manager and/or Supervisory Veterinary Medical Officer (VMO).
 - The position will continue to serve the epidemiology function.
 - Interested candidates are encouraged to contact the Minnesota Area Veterinary in Charge (AVIC).
- Two Animal Health Technician positions are also being recruited.

Overall: Minnesota Veterinary Services continues to rebuild staffing following recent retirements and vacancies, with priority positions being filled to maintain field coverage, emergency response capacity, and epidemiology support.

