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Genetics help Argentine police beat cattle rustlers

Tue Dec 30, 2008 4:24pm GMT

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By Maximiliano Rizzi

LA PLATA, Argentina (Reuters) - Cattle-rustling is an age-old problem on Argentina's legendary Pampas plains, but genetic testing is helping police crack down on thieves.

Argentina, one of the world's top beef exporters, is famous for its free-range beef from grass-fed cattle. Experts say lax controls and the sheer scale of some landholdings make it easy for rustlers.

However, plans are under way to expand a pioneering database of samples of genetic material from 10,000 cattle that has helped police solve 270 cases of cattle-rustling since it was established in Buenos Aires province seven years ago.

Even filet steaks or sausages suspected of coming from stolen animals can be used as a source of genetic material to cross-reference with the samples of hair, blood or flesh kept in the cattle database, which is managed by the state-run Genetic Veterinary Institute (Igevet).

Before the database was set up, it was difficult for police to prove rustling, even when they had identified suspects.

"The police always knew who it was ... but there was no evidence that could prove it," said Pilar Peral Garcia, director of Igevet, which is based in the city of La Plata, capital of Buenos Aires province.

So far, the scheme only has been used by police in Buenos Aires, but Igevet scientists are holding talks with provincial officials with an eye to setting up genetic cattle registers in others parts of the South American country.

They also want police to get better training on how to use the new tool against rustling.

"A lot of time they send us a whole skull to take samples from, when really the only thing we need is a centimeter of meat," said Diego Posik, a researcher at Igevet, which is part of the University of La Plata and the National Council of Scientific and Technical Investigation (CONICET).

(Writing by Helen Popper, editing by Vicki Allen)

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