VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Records and Data

Data that delivers valuable information for herd health and reproductive efficiency.

Different veterinarians have preferences for different types of records and recordkeeping systems, but all would agree having accurate information is valuable. The use of records is essential to identify sources of inefficient production and disease problems, so management changes can be implemented and effects of those decisions on production and health efficiency can be tracked.

From a recordkeeping standpoint, the needs of cow-calf ranches differ from other livestock operations. Cow-calf ranches only collect usable information at a few specific times of the year, such as at pregnancy check, weaning and pasture turnout when cattle are handled. This is in contrast to dairies, feedlots and swine operations that hand-deliver feed on a daily basis, market frequently and tend to have more animals so treatment for disease is a frequent activity of herd management.

Because of these differences, cow-calf herds can have very effective recordkeeping systems that are simpler than systems needed by other livestock production systems. In fact, a lot of important information can be captured on the ear tag or freeze brand (year of birth, sire, calving order — i.e., born early or late in calving season), and

paper or relatively simple computer programs can be used to keep and organize ranch production and health records.

Reproductive information

From a reproductive efficiency standpoint, I am interested in the percentage of the herd that becomes pregnant in the first 21 days of the breeding season and by the end of the breeding season. The record system, therefore, needs to include a date when each cow calves.

I am also interested in knowing which types of animals are most likely to fail to become pregnant. By "which types," I mean I am interested in characteristics such as age, body condition score (BCS) and physical location.

For example, having records that allow a producer to identify 3-year-old cows that were more likely to fail to become pregnant than 2-year-old cows, and that 4- to 8-year-old cows were the most likely age groups to become pregnant helps to identify specific groups of cows that require more attention. In addition, being able to identify that cows in one pasture were more likely to fail to become pregnant compared to other pastures directs attention to the bulls or other factors present in that pasture.

To address health concerns, many ranches record all open cows, abortions, illnesses and deaths. Veterinarians can utilize this information to pinpoint problems to specific age groups, pastures, months of the year or other factors that may be contributing to the losses.

For example, having records that allow the identification of which weeks of the calving seasons or which calf ages are most likely to have scours will allow producers to focus their management efforts on high-risk populations.

My current thought is to prioritize collecting and analyzing information that is most relevant for actions and decisions that will have the greatest effect on production efficiency.

For small herds or herds where the needed information is very simple, a notebook with hand-written notes will do the job. As herd numbers increase or as the questions asked demand more information, a more sophisticated recordkeeping system is needed. **AJ**

Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University.