

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Keeping Records in Order to Improve Production Efficiency

The information a producer keeps about his herd can help improve profit.

Cow-calf producers must continually work to improve herd efficiency through increasing the value of animals sold and/or decreasing the cost of production. The use of records is essential to identify inefficient production and then to track the effects of management decisions. Veterinarians working with beef cattle producers use records to assess reproductive and economic efficiency and to investigate disease outbreaks.

The simplest form of recordkeeping is head counts for the purpose of keeping accurate inventories. The next level is whole-herd data that includes percent calf crop, percent pregnant, average sale weights and total pounds of feed used, which provides adequate information to get a picture of overall herd performance.

However, measuring total income and total costs does not provide information about the individual decisions directly under the rancher's control. Expanding the recordkeeping system to include individual animal performance will require a greater commitment of time and expense, but can provide more specific information for identifying problems and possible solutions.

The most important information when evaluating the income side of a commercial ranching business has to do with reproductive efficiency. This includes the percentage of cows exposed to bulls diagnosed pregnant at preg-check time and the percentage of the cows that become pregnant during the first 21 days of the breeding season. Therefore, the recordkeeping system needs to include a date when each cow calves.


I am also interested in knowing the percentage of exposed cows that wean a calf, and any differences in reproductive efficiency by cow age group, body condition score (BCS), genetic background or breeding pasture. In order to answer these questions, producers need to collect more pieces of information.

On the expense side, grazing costs as well as purchased feed costs will account for the majority of herd expenses. By looking at each cost area individually, producers can compare current costs with herd goals.

To address health concerns, many farms and ranches record all open cows, abortions, illnesses and deaths. Veterinarians can utilize this information to pinpoint which cattle got sick or died, age of cattle affected, observed behavior that caused concern, the date an animal was first

identified as sick or died, and which pasture or lot the sick animals were housed in prior to being identified. Any information about individual sick cattle or outbreaks of disease should be kept for several years so if a similar problem reoccurs, accurate information is available.

As more questions are asked, the more information needs to be collected, and the more comprehensive the record systems need to become. For small herds or herds where needed information is very simple, a notebook with handwritten notes will do the job.

As herd numbers increase or as the questions asked demand more information, a more sophisticated recordkeeping system is needed. Every record system has its strengths and weaknesses. These strengths and weaknesses are based on the fact that the more one wants out of a program in the way of reports and calculations, the more complicated the data entry becomes. The secret to being happy with your record system is to create one that will answer all the questions you want it to be able to answer, but not a lot more. 

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