Tech Notes

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Even the good ones can go bad

I recently had a call from a breeder whose computer literally caught on fire. It was a newly purchased computer. When the breeder turned it on, something shorted out and caught fire, or at least did a lot of smoking and smoldering. The call seemed like an omen that I should write about backups (although in this case, the data was saved on another computer). Even though I've written about backups before, experience shows me that constant reminders are necessary, even for myself.

How to make a backup

The process for making a backup of the Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) data is actually very simple. You simply choose File, Backup, then enter a file name and press Enter (or click on Save).

By default, AIMS will build a file name using your member code and an extension. Normally, it is better to type your own file name so that it will mean something to you in the future.

File names can be virtually anything you want, like "Monday" or "After Calving Season," anything up to 255 alphanumeric characters, but avoid punctuation. Your file name will have an extension added to it that starts with ".BK" followed by a number. The extension is there to help the Restore function know if the file is a valid backup, and the number in the extension further helps make file names unique.

Why make a backup?

There's an old computer adage that states "if you don't want to type it again, make a backup." That's pretty good advice. As you know, Murphy's Law is working against you. Just when you can least afford to lose your data, you will lose it — the hard drive will crash or any number of other horrible occurrences (including computer fires) will happen. You'll be out of luck unless you have an appropriate backup.

Here are some things to consider:

▶Make backups to your hard drive frequently, as often as every day you work with AIMS. I think many AIMS users assume the only type of backup is one you make to a floppy disk. While it's great to make backups to floppies (keep reading), it's also useful to make backups to the hard drive, into the default folder (c:\aims20\backup).

You can use a rotational system where you make a backup with the name of the day as the file name — Monday, Tuesday, etc. It's normally better to have more than one backup so that if one day's backup goes bad, you can defer to the backup made the day before.

▶Occasionally make backups to an external media. Making daily backups onto the hard drive is great until the hard drive crashes, so be sure to save some of those files (or copy them after a regular backup) to a floppy disk, zip disk or CD-ROM. You do this by changing the Save In field on the backup screen, then provide a file name or use the default file name. A rule of thumb would be to make an external backup at least once a week during peak data entry seasons.

▶Once in a while, take one of your backup floppies (or zip disk or CD-ROM) to an offsite location. While having backups on floppies saves you from a hard-drive crash, it doesn't save you from a more serious problem where the entire building is destroyed, perhaps in a fire or flood. This is paranoia to an extreme, but your data is valuable, and it's easy to protect, so put a backup on a disk and get it out of the building. Fire-safe boxes are an alternative, but it's still recommended that you take a copy elsewhere every now and then.

▶While you're making backups to disk, make another copy and e-mail it to the AIMS department. This accomplishes two things: 1) you get a copy out of the house/office, and 2) the AIMS staff will check that it is a good file to confirm that backups are being made correctly. You could do this once or twice a year.

When to make a backup

The basic time frame to make a backup is discussed in the previous section — daily to the hard drive and weekly to a floppy disk, plus taking a copy offsite every now and then. But there's no law against making backups even more frequently. The following list includes some examples of other key times to make a backup so that, if something goes wrong, you can quickly restore the backup to the point just before you did the last process. So, you could also make a backup …

▶ before you run a performance or expected progeny difference (EPD) update;

▶ before you run Calculate for weaning, yearling or carcass data;

▶ before you delete specific animals or a pen, and especially just before deleting all animals in a pen;

▶ before you make big changes to the sort order or members of a pen; and

▶ before you turn somebody who has never used AIMS before loose with it.

What gets backed up?

The most important file included in these backups is named aims22.db, which is in the c:\aims20\folder. This file includes all of your animals, performance and pedigree information, breeding data, comments, medical records, etc., as well as all of the information on your customers.

But the AIMS Backup process is actually backing up more than just your AIMS data file. Other files include:

▶ aims.ini, which stores basic information like the defaults found under Tools, Options;

▶ pens.ini and oldpens.ini store pen selection steps for current and old pens, although these files are being phased out;

▶ medical.txt and incexp.txt store the procedure names for Medical and Income/Expense information.

Technically, you could copy aims22.db to a floppy or CD-ROM and you would have a decent backup, but it would help to get these other five files also. The AIMS Backup process takes the six files and compresses

them into the smallest size possible, giving you a single file with the file name you accepted.
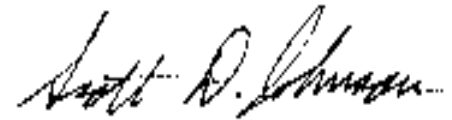
Check your backup

The only thing worse than losing your data and not having a backup is losing your data and having a *bad*, *unusable* backup. So, once you have made the backup, it's a good idea to use My Computer or Windows Explorer to check on the size of the file. If it is only a few kilobytes (KB), like 4 or so, then it's probably *not* a valid backup. Normal backups should exceed 500 KB, depending on the number of animals in your herd and the amount of data on each one.

Another way to check your backup is to restore it to a *different* computer. Be sure to have a way to know the newly restored data is in place. For example, the number of animals in All Animals should change, or something about a specific animal changes, perhaps a comment. I don't necessarily recommend restoring to the same computer since restoring an empty backup on top of good data just erases all your data.

Remember ...

You can get a new data file from the Association for $25, but that only includes the officially recorded data on registered animals. All of that other information — comments, medical records, customers, breeding data and more — will be lost if you don't have a good backup. Wouldn't *now* be a good time to go make a backup?

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