

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Herd Health and Production Recordkeeping

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. In addition, the trend toward identity preservation and process verification means many producers require records that can document production practices and track growth efficiency and carcass quality after cattle leave the ranch.

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

Expanding the recordkeeping system to include individual animal performance will require a greater commitment of time and expense, but it can provide more specific information for identifying problems and possible solutions in the future.

From a production standpoint, I am very interested in the percentage of the herd that becomes pregnant in the first 21 days of the breeding season. Therefore the record system needs to include a date (day or week) 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, we need to also collect even more pieces of information.

Data collection

To address health concerns, many farms and 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. This type of record system is very helpful to veterinarians, but it requires a dedicated effort on the part of the cattle producer.

Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) addresses management decisions directly affecting the quality of beef products sold to consumers as well as the health and welfare of the herd. Accurate documentation of all events from the time of birth through all of the production phases is becoming the expected level of recordkeeping. Whenever a vaccine, dewormer, fly control, antibiotic or other product is administered to cattle, you should

record the exact name and serial number of the product, the dose administered and how the cattle were treated (i.e., by mouth, in the muscle, under the skin, etc.).

As more questions are asked, more information needs to be collected and the more comprehensive the record system needs to become. For small herds or herds where the 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, and 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. **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 in Manhattan, Kan.