



Vet Call

► by **Bob Larson**, Kansas State University

Health and production recordkeeping

Although most cattle producers agree that good recordkeeping is important, many operations are not currently collecting valuable information that can be used in management decisions and marketing efforts. Because each of us will only do what we enjoy doing (or are forced to do), recordkeeping should be approached to try to maximize enjoyment or minimize pain.

The importance of recordkeeping

From a recordkeeping standpoint, the needs of cow-calf ranches differ from other livestock operations such as dairies, feedlots, and swine or poultry operations in that cow-calf ranches only collect usable information at a few specific times of the year, such as at preg-check, weaning, pasture turnout, or other times that specific ranches handle their cattle. This is in contrast to other livestock production systems that hand-deliver feed on a daily basis, measure production on a daily (dairy) or at least on a weekly or monthly (swine or poultry) basis due to frequent marketing, and tend to have more animals so that treatment for disease is a frequent activity of herd management.

Because of these differences, the relatively low amount and frequency of data collection in cow-calf herds allows ranchers to 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, such as year of birth, sire information and calving order. Paper or relatively simple computer programs can be used to keep and organize ranch production and health records.

The first set of records that you should keep should answer a pressing question or solve an immediate need. Your primary need today may be to have the information gathered to make filling out tax forms easier next year. Or you may want to know which cows are weaning the fastest-growing calves. By starting a recordkeeping effort with one or a limited number of objectives in mind, it is easy to see what information you need to gather and how that information will be used.

Once you have identified exactly what you

want to know, how you will collect the information also becomes obvious. For example, if you want to determine which cows calved in the first 21 days of the calving season, you will need a way to identify each cow and you will need to know when each cow calves (to the day, week or 21-day period, depending on whether the herd is a registered or commercial herd, and the current level of data collection).

Often, I find that once the first pressing question is answered, other questions become important. As more questions are asked, such as which bulls are weaning the heaviest calves, or which bull's daughters stay in the herd the longest, the more information needs to be collected, and the more sophisticated the recordkeeping systems need to become.

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 pieces of information, a computer program makes recordkeeping much easier. Some producers make their own record system using a spreadsheet or database software program to customize their records to their specific needs. Many other cattlemen utilize commercially available cow-calf record programs.

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 a computer record program is to find one that will answer all the questions you want it to be able to answer, but not a lot more.

Different veterinarians have preferences for different types of records and recordkeeping systems, but all would agree that having

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accurate information about the herd has many valuable uses, including: to assist in the assessment of production efficiency, to help in the investigation of disease outbreaks, and as a component of Beef Quality Assurance (BQA). From a production standpoint, I am most interested in the percentage of the herd that becomes pregnant in the first 21 days of the breeding season, the percentage of exposed cows that wean a calf, and any differences in reproductive efficiency by cow age group (heifer, first-calf heifer, cow), body condition score (BCS), genetic background or breeding pasture.

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 recordkeeping is very helpful to veterinarians, but requires a dedicated effort on the part of producers to collect information over many years and to have an information storage system that allows efficient search and retrieval.

BQA involves several aspects of cattle management that directly affect the quality of the beef products sold to consumers, as well as the health and welfare of the herd. Accurate documentation of all events that occur to an animal from the time of birth through all of the production phases and on into the slaughterhouse is becoming the expected level of recordkeeping. Each time a vaccine, dewormer, fly control, antibiotic or other product is administered to cattle, you should record the exact name of the product, the serial number of the product you purchased, the dose that was administered, and how the cattle were treated (i.e., by mouth, in the muscle, under the skin, etc.).

If you decide that your current level of recordkeeping is holding you back from improved production efficiency, it is important to know what you want to gain from your records and to match the most appropriate recordkeeping method or computer program to your needs and then to diligently follow through with appropriate information collection.

EMAIL: rlarson@vet.k-state.edu

Editor's Note: Bob Larson is professor of production medicine at Kansas State University.

