

Measuring up



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Do you remember your mom asking you when you were a child to stand with your back against the wall so she could place a mark to indicate your height? Done every year on the same day — maybe your birthday — it provided the story of your growth to adulthood.

I can only imagine how the practice got started and why it took hold as a widespread tradition. For whatever reason, it made moving more difficult because of the sentimental value attached to memories elicited by each benchmark.

Practical uses

Over time, I've come to believe benchmarking is human nature — part of our instinct for coping with our environment for survival. Case in point: My grandpa and grandma would take the time to record the details of the weather every morning, recording it on their kitchen calendar. Temperature. Barometric pressure. Precipitation. Whether it was windy or still.

To a child it seemed unimportant. However, as an adult, it seems very practical, especially for the second generation in country to plot out the weather patterns of their western Kansas ranch. It wasn't like they had The Weather Channel™ to tell them the high, low and average temperatures for the day or to predict whether it would rain the day they planned to wean calves. While you can't change the weather, you can use past trends to predict what will happen and to get in synchrony with your environment.

More importantly, you can use some of those benchmarks in problem-solving. If you had an exceptional wheat year, when did you plant the crop? How much rain did you get through the season? If you had a crop failure, same thing. Over time, the observations of our ancestors established the rules of thumb we have today.

With our dependence today on The Weather Channel, our iPhones® and Google's search function, have we lost our motivation to observe our own patch of ground and our own bovines? National and regional benchmarks can give us comparisons, but there is no replacement for observing what your herd does in your environment with your management practices.

Six benchmarks to note

Left to me, I'd record everything I could down to the temperature the day you vaccinate your calves (I should work on a research farm). That's over the top, but here are a half dozen fairly easy things to monitor if you take the time to record them each year and compile them in a three-ring binder.

- ▶ As you do taxes this year, collect the weights of the cows that you sent to market, along with a small description. Was she 1,100 pounds (lb.) and thin because she was 14? Was she 1,600 lb. and culled because she was open? Are you culling cows less than 1,000 lb. and cows more than 1,500 lb.? Are you culling cows born a particular year earlier than others? What bulls did you use that year?
- ▶ Record the average market weights of your calves for the year, along with a notation of any management differences. Was it a drought year? Did you try a different feeding regimen?
- ▶ Record your annual inventories — number of cows, bulls, calves and acres at minimum.
- ▶ Set a date to take a picture of your pasture from the same spot three times throughout the year, and do it annually. April 15, July 4 and Labor Day weekend are good days to remember.
- ▶ A week after your last calf was born, figure your calving percentage and death loss, recording reasons for the losses.
- ▶ Record end-point data, such as price received per lb., or carcass characteristics.

Each year designate a time to take a look back at the last few years and watch for trends. Are your cull cow weights increasing and your pastures looking sparse? Are your cow weights and your calf weights in sync? Are you getting heavyweight discounts at market?

Monitoring your benchmarks will give you the best opportunity to match your herd to your resources, and give you the best chance at profitability. |

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