

HEALTH & HUSBANDRY

Is your herd healthy? Check the dashboard

by Brad White, Kansas State University Beef Cattle Institute



Keeping the herd healthy is a continuous process combining preventive procedures and

proactive measures throughout the year. A healthy cow-calf herd is critical to long-term success, but herd health is not created based on a single event. Knowing the current herd health status is important to both identify problems and highlight opportunities for improvement.

How do you measure herd health?

Your truck has a dashboard that provides warning lights if something goes wrong. What about your herd? The percent of calves weaned per cow exposed (CW/CE) is the first number I would evaluate to determine herd health. You do not need a complicated record system to calculate this metric. To compute CW/CE, input the number of calves weaned, the number of cows present at weaning and the number of cows sold/died since the previous breeding season in the formula below:

$$\text{CW/CE} = \frac{\text{Number of calves weaned} + (\text{Number of cows at weaning} - \text{cows sold or died since last breeding})}{\text{Number of cows at weaning}}$$

Your existing records are often adequate to help you compute CW/CE, and results give your herd a dashboard light to evaluate current health status. CW/CE also gauges economic success because it combines two of the main drivers of herd profitability by monitoring proxies for income (number of calves sold) related to the main variable cost driver (number of cows needed to produce the calves).

Is my herd healthy?

CW/CE provides a snapshot of overall herd health and reproductive

performance. Several factors influence the outcome, including problems with conception, reproductive loss and calf death loss after birth. This metric does not distinguish the specific problem. However, like the engine warning light on your truck, if the numbers are low then there is a problem that merits investigation.

My herd target is 90%. While this is a realistic target, often healthy herds are in the 87%-90% range. If herds are above 90% year after year, then we know the nutrition strategy is working, the reproductive program was successful, and we did not have any major calf health events. If your CW/CE is between 85% and 90%, I would recommend continued monitoring and evaluation of specific areas to identify where to focus the preventative health efforts.

If this number is below 85%, then a problem is present and further work should be performed to find the cause. I would initiate the investigation by looking into several key areas, including:

- ▶ the percent of the herd that was bred in the first 21 days of the breeding season;
- ▶ overall pregnancy percentage; and
- ▶ calf death loss.

My goal is 65% of the herd calving in the first 21 days of the calving season, indicating that the cows were cycling at the start of breeding and we had an adequate number of fertile bulls. I would also evaluate the number of pregnancies over the entire breeding period with a goal of 90%-95% pregnant over a confined breeding season. Finally, an evaluation of the calf death loss after birth is important. We expect calf mortality to be less than 2.5%. Each of these areas may require a different preventative health solution, and this is a

Meet our new columnist, Brad White

Brad White received his doctor of veterinary medicine (DVM) from the University of Missouri-Columbia and worked for six years in a mixed animal practice in southeast Missouri. His emphasis in practice was beef cow-calf and stocker medicine and management. He then worked for two years in beef production medicine at Mississippi State University concurrent with completion of his master's degree.

He is currently on faculty at the Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine and serves as director of the

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great opportunity to work with your veterinarian to modify your preventative health strategy as needed.

Next-level evaluation

While the percent of calves weaned per cow exposed is a great metric and useful for comparing among herds, a more accurate way to track progress in your herd over time is to evaluate the pounds (lb.) of calves weaned per cow exposed. This number is not as comparable among herds due to differences in cow size, and there is not a single benchmark to evaluate success.

Calculating the lb. weaned per cow exposed and comparing annually provides a valuable tool to evaluate continuous improvement in your herd. The goal is to grow the number of lb. weaned while holding variable costs (number of cows) at a similar level.

One area to watch carefully is that weaning weights may be increasing, but mature cow size is also growing — leading to greater

feeding expenses to produce more lb. of calves.

Building your dashboard

This is a great year to start building your herd dashboard, and percent calves weaned per cow exposed is the first gauge I would add to make sure the herd is staying healthy. CW/CE provides a snapshot of herd performance and can highlight potential problem areas in the herd. This is the first step to building a more complete dashboard of overall herd performance and evaluating the outcomes of your herd health strategy.

Maintaining herd health is a continuous process and a great opportunity to work with your local veterinarian to evaluate opportunities to improve for your herd. |

Editor's note: "Health & Husbandry" is a regular column in the *Angus Beef Bulletin* devoted to the care and well-being of the herd. Author Brad White is on faculty at the Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine and serves as director of the Beef Cattle Institute (see <https://ksubci.org/>).