



The Veterinary Link

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Health, production recordkeeping

Extension speakers, veterinarians, bankers and others who advise cattlemen have advocated recordkeeping for decades; however, little change is apparent. In my opinion, the primary reason is because most cattlemen do not particularly enjoy the work involved in recordkeeping.

I often hear, "Doc, if I had wanted a desk job, I would have gotten a job in town!" I understand this sentiment, but I am going to add my voice to the chorus of advice about keeping records for your farm or ranch.

Start slowly

Because each of us will do only what we enjoy doing (or are forced to do), recordkeeping should be approached to try to maximize enjoyment (or to minimize pain). Too many times, cattlemen are encouraged to record and to keep hundreds of pieces of information, with the assurance that they will appreciate all they will learn about their cattle, their ranch and their income.

Most of us, however, tire of the work of collecting and keeping the information while we are waiting for the rewards to start appearing. A less grandiose plan is to

start with a few pieces of information to record and to only add new pieces of information as needed.

The first set of records that you should keep should answer a pressing question or satisfy 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 to collect information and to begin 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 are weaning the heaviest calves, you will need a way to identify each cow and each calf, and you will need a scale to measure weaning weight. The records needed in such a situation are simple and will answer the immediate question.

I often find that, once the pressing question is answered, other questions become important. For example, once we

know which cows are weaning the heaviest calves, we may want to know which cows are weaning the calves with the highest weight per day of age (WDA). In order to answer this question, we also need to collect another piece of information — the birth date or birth week of each calf.

As more questions — such as which bulls are siring the heaviest weaned calves or which bull's daughters stay in the herd the longest — are asked, more information needs to be collected, and recordkeeping systems need to become more sophisticated.

Time to computerize?

For small herds or herds where the needed information is simple, a notebook with handwritten 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 computerized record system using an electronic spreadsheet in order to customize their records to their specific needs. Many cattlemen use commercially available record programs, including the Angus Beef Record Service (BRS).

Every record system has its strengths and weaknesses. The more you want from 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.

Reasons why

From a health standpoint, recordkeeping falls into two categories: (1) that which is needed for regulatory and marketing purposes and (2) that which is used to monitor your farm's health performance so efficiency can be improved.

The first category includes keeping all necessary information for health certificates and sale releases (see example) that are now being required for most cattle transactions. This type of accountability for the food we produce will increase with time, and the need for

Example:

Auction market certification of FDA compliance

The cattle described on the attached invoice(s) were provided to this operation by a person or persons who signed a certificate stating that, to the best of their knowledge, the cattle they sold have been handled in accordance with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) ban of feeding identified mammalian-derived protein materials to ruminant animals (Title 21, Part 589 of the Code of Federal Regulations, effective Aug. 4, 1997). Requirements for establishments and individuals that are responsible for feeding ruminant animals shall entail maintaining copies of purchase invoices and labeling for all feeds containing mammalian-derived protein products received for a minimum of one (1) year and making copies available for inspection and copying by the FDA, if necessary.

Those consignors must also state the following: While in their possession, all cattle presented for slaughter have been handled in a manner to prevent a pharmaceutical or agricultural chemical residue violation. Label dosages, route of administration and withdrawal times have been followed, and only approved FDA pharmaceutical compounds have been used for treatment.

Signed _____ Livestock Market _____
Name _____ Address _____
Dated _____

accurate records to document the products we administer, the feed our cattle consume, and the way cattle are handled and raised also will increase.

Because we expect some level of disease and death when raising livestock, a record system to track the rates and causes of illness and death is necessary to know when to intervene. Many farms and ranches record all open cows, abortions, illnesses and deaths. Veterinarians can use this information to determine if a problem is greater than

would be expected from normal variation in rates of disease and death.

If a problem does exist, the records can be used to pinpoint it to specific age groups, pastures, months or other factors that may be contributing to the losses. This type of recordkeeping is helpful to veterinarians, but it requires a dedicated effort on the producer's part to collect the information over many years and usually a computer system that allows the information to be sorted for greatest value.

The key to success is to know what you want to gain from your records, to match the most appropriate recordkeeping method or computer program to your needs, and to diligently follow through with appropriate information collection.

