

Decision-making tools:

Free — If You Can Find Them

Story by
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Not long ago, during a large producer-education meeting featuring a presentation on disease prevention and treatment protocols, the speaker recommended a computer program that stocker and feedlot operators could use to evaluate treatment strategies. The speaker went on to explain how the costs of treatments with different antibiotics could be compared, utilizing a spreadsheet program developed by veterinarian Dee Griffin of the University of Nebraska (NU) Great Plains Veterinary Educational Center (GPVEC).

Many producers in the audience were obviously surprised to learn that the program could be downloaded free of charge. They scribbled down the Web site address (<http://gpvec.unl.edu>). Several grinned and nodded when one fellow spoke up from the back of the room. "How do you find out about stuff like that?" he asked.

A lot of cattle producers have become technologically savvy, using their computers for keeping records and paying bills, and for gathering and storing production data. Even with data at their fingertips, producers may need help turning numbers into information from which they can make sound management decisions. Some have turned to decision-maker software — computer programs that help managers make informed choices. And many of these programs are free for the downloading, if you know where to find them.

A good place to start is your nearest land-grant university. Look for decision-making programs among resources listed on home pages for the animal science or agricultural economics departments, or through the cooperative Extension service site. Not all software available through university sources is free, but the producer who

is willing to hunt will find useful tools at no cost. A few examples are mentioned below.

Nutrition assistants

Oklahoma State University (OSU) offers one of the longest lists of Windows®-based software and interactive programs. A number of free decision-making aids can be downloaded from the animal science department's Web site at www.ansi.okstate.edu. Professor Don Gill says the site receives thousands of hits every week. To use the programs, he adds, producers must have an IBM-compatible computer and a Windows 95 (or newer) operating system.

"We do get some calls from folks asking why they can't get our programs downloaded. They won't be able to if their computers aren't equipped with Microsoft Excel software. It has become the standard, so we write all of our spreadsheet programs in Excel," Gill explains. "But even if you can't download the programs to your own computer, producers can link up to our Web site and use many of them online."

Gill says a program called Cowculator is used extensively to assist producers in making decisions related to beef cow nutrition. Producers can enter animal criteria, such as cow weight, body condition score (BCS), stage of gestation, as well as information regarding the feeding period and feed resources, to customize the program to each operation. Different scenarios within an operation can also be compared.

Based on the user's conditions, the Cowculator determines whether the diet being evaluated meets recommended nutrient requirements to achieve a specific

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Many universities offer software programs for producers to use for management purposes. These programs can often be downloaded and used for free. (PHOTO BY ANGIE STUMP DENTON)

production goal. From the program's summary, a producer can determine the amount of forage and supplement required to feed a group of cattle each day. Also determined are the costs associated with each dietary ingredient on a per head per day basis or for the entire feeding period. This program also reports costs associated with storage and feeding loss of feedstuffs.

Also relating to cow nutrition, Kansas State University (K-State) offers a tool to help producers interpret results of standard laboratory tests for minerals. The free software, titled MinCheck, allows the user to input up to two different commercial or custom-made mineral mixes. The software evaluates the combined contri-

butions of minerals from the diet, including grazed or harvested forages, and from supplements. To find MinCheck, go to www.oznet.ksu.edu/ansi/software/mincheck.htm, and click on "Software from Extension ASI."

Calf management

Producers wondering whether to start preconditioning their calves can use tools such as OSU's Precon 2001 program. This preconditioning value calculator allows the user to consider costs and expected returns associated with marketing calves that

are preconditioned and weaned for a predetermined period of time prior to sale.

The cost of feed, health supplies, labor and interest are entered on the spreadsheet, along with information such as starting weight, projected sale weight and expected selling price. The program does the calculations, delivering a profit/loss report for the preconditioning regimen.

"It will tell the producer how much premium must be generated to make a preconditioning program work," Gill adds.

The OSU site offers a number of decision-making tools for stocker and feedlot managers. Nutrition programs are tailored to growing and finishing rations. The OSU Stocker Planner program helps the user evaluate the purchase of calves to graze on pasture or wheat. Producers who have a good understanding of their costs can plug them into the program and estimate how much they can pay for cattle and be profitable.

"We have two feedlot calculators that will show how much [the user] can pay for feeder cattle and break even, based on the producer's estimated feeding costs and projected or locked-in sale price. One program is pretty basic, but it gets you in the ballpark. The other program is more advanced," Gill adds.

To find an assortment of decision-making aids available

(Continued on page 80)

Decision-making tools (from page 79)

through Iowa State University (ISU), go to www.iowabeefcenter.org and click on "Downloadable Beef Software." There, you will find an Excel spreadsheet application, the Feeder Cattle Bid Calculator, for calculating feeder cattle breakeven purchase prices across a user-defined range of grain prices and finished

cattle sale prices. A similar program is applicable to the purchase of calves for backgrounding programs. For the high-tech producer who uses a hand-held computer, Iowa State's "Sale Barn Calculator" provides a quick way to figure a maximum bid for livestock entering a sale ring. It is designed for hand-held

computers using Palm OS operating systems.

Herd management

For breeders practicing synchronized artificial insemination (AI), ISU also offers a synchronization system planner, which aids in establishing a program schedule. This simple spreadsheet also allows the user to input costs of semen, technician

services, drugs and feed to perform a cost analysis.

At Cornell University's animal science department Web site (www.ansci.cornell.edu/beef), producers can find Beef Cowherd V2, a DOS program that can be used to match cow herd numbers and nutritional requirements with the operation's forage-producing potential. Results of the analysis tell the user if herd size matches the available land base. The program can then be used to determine if different forage and herd management strategies, such as soil fertilization, adjustment of herd numbers or changing calving season, could enhance profitability.

Beef cattle resources offered through Colorado State University's (CSU) animal science site (www.colostate.edu/Depts/AnimSci/) include an Excel spreadsheet for analyzing the economics of raising replacement females vs. purchasing them.

A program for evaluating cow-lease arrangements for equitable sharing of calf crops can be found through K-State's department of agricultural economics (www.agmanager.info), along with a new program for evaluating the use of electronic individual animal identification (ID) systems.

K-State's Kevin Dhuyvetter says the program calculates the annualized costs of implementing and maintaining a system, including tags, necessary electronic equipment and management software. By entering 15 to 20 numbers and letting the program perform the calculations, users can determine if electronic ID is feasible for their own herds.

Only a sample

The decision-making tools listed here are only a sample of the software currently available. Dhuyvetter admits that they aren't always easy to find, unless producers already know where to look. Cooperative Extension personnel can offer directions to Web sites where programs are offered free of charge.

"There really are quite a lot of programs out there. If you spend enough time looking, you'll be barraged in spreadsheets — many designed for similar purposes, but slightly different. Then, the question is which to use," Dhuyvetter adds.

"There is a lot of stuff to wade through if you're trying to evaluate different programs from various sources. And I'm not sure that represents good use of a producer's time. I recommend that producers use tools developed by people they are familiar with and trust. Find some [programs] that you feel good about, and stick with them. They really can help you make better decisions."