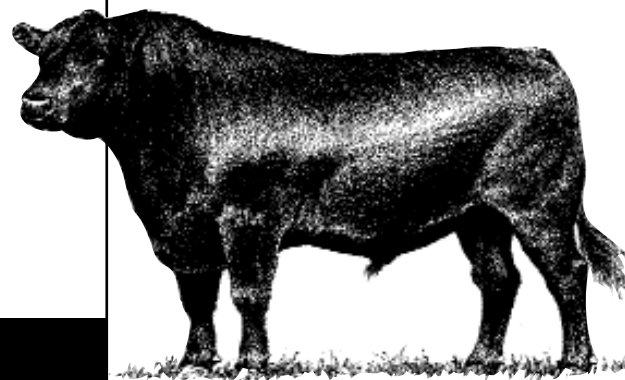


# ANGUS

## BEEF BULLETIN

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Keeping records, such as the date of birth and origin, is becoming increasingly important.  
[PHOTO BY CORINNE PATTERSON]

# Ten to Keep

*A university beef specialist gives his top-10 list of what ranch records to keep and why.*

Story by  
**KINDRA GORDON**

In the beef industry, recordkeeping has always been an important practice — namely to track genetic performance and profitability. But since the 2003 incident of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in the United States, recordkeeping is also coming into the spotlight for biosecurity reasons.

As an example, because of the 2003 BSE event, numerous export markets, including the billion-dollar customer Japan, have closed the border to

American beef. A sticking point in reopening those markets — specifically from Japan — is the demand that cattle be 20 months or younger to be eligible for export. Thus, to enhance future marketing options, U.S. cow-calf producers are being encouraged to keep birth records on all of their calves.

"Recording origin and date of birth for calves is becoming an increasingly important record to have now. It can't be ignored in this day and age," says South Dakota State University Extension beef specialist Trey Patterson.

While recordkeeping does mean

more effort on the part of the producer, Patterson says producers should also view it as an important and powerful tool. He says along with documenting when calves are born in preparation for export source verification programs, keeping well-documented ranch records can help producers monitor where they are and help determine where they need to go for production.

"Records can give you the tools to help determine how to increase profitability," he says.

For example, Patterson says it is critical for beef producers to know unit cost of production (UCOP), which is determined by variable and fixed costs minus non-calf revenue divided by pounds of weaned calf. "To make decisions, you can then analyze the unit cost of production, identify areas of high leverage and make effective short-term management decisions," he says.

### The top 10

That said, Patterson shares this list of records that he advocates be kept on the ranch:

**1. Inventory.** "Inventory is important because it provides all the numbers needed to calculate benchmark information," Patterson says. Inventory to track includes:

- number of cows exposed to bulls, which is important because it is a denominator in many calculations;
- number of cows at calving time, to determine calving rate per cow exposed;
- number of calves weaned, to determine weaning rate per cow exposed;
- number of cattle sold or dead and the corresponding date;
- number of head purchased and the date;
- number of replacement females; and
- number of bulls.

**2. Individual animal identification (ID).** It's a given that seedstock producers already do this for genetic evaluation, but, as mentioned above, individual animal ID is becoming an imperative industrywide practice for biosecurity reasons.

"From a biosecurity standpoint this is important even if we don't have COOL (country-of-origin labeling) or national ID, because individual ID gives

(Continued on page 4)

## INSIDE

### Features & News

Pinpoint optimal milk levels. ....	10
AngusSource <sup>SM</sup> participants share benefits being gained. ....	15
Are your replacement heifers reproductively ready? ....	20
Deal with noncycling cows. ....	24
Trial and success lead to quality-focused cow herd. ....	49
It is possible to keep discounts in check while hitting the <i>Certified Angus Beef</i> <sup>®</sup> brand target. ....	57
CAB recognizes monthly honorees. ....	63
Cattle producers attend the 2005 Cattle Industry Annual Convention. ....	64

### Column Links

• Association Highlights .....	6
• Commercial Programs Department .....	12
• Outside the Box .....	26
• Market Advisor .....	29
• Industry Link .....	31
• Ridin' Herd .....	35
• Veterinary Link .....	41
• Certified Angus Beef LLC .....	52
• Back to Basics .....	68
• Beef Talk .....	70
• Research Link .....	72
• New Products .....	74
• Angus Sales .....	78
• Advertiser Index .....	84

### Staff

• Angus Productions Inc. ....	4
• American Angus Association .....	12
• Certified Angus Beef LLC .....	52
• Regional Managers .....	86

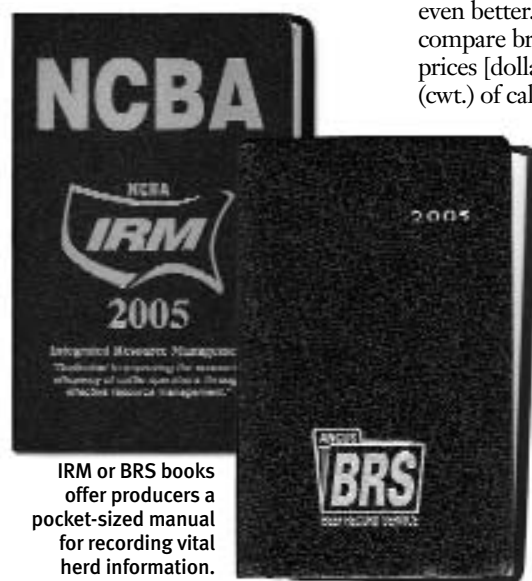
### Services

• American Angus Association membership form .....	48
• National Junior Angus Association membership information .....	61
• <i>Angus Journal</i> subscription form .....	71

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**Ten to Keep** (from page 1)

IRM or BRS books offer producers a pocket-sized manual for recording vital herd information.

the ability to trace an animal," Patterson says. "If you have a cow with BSE or foot-and-mouth disease (FMD), don't you want to have the ability to show you've done things right? It can protect you."

Individual animal ID records should document the calf's place of origin and date of birth, as well as health, vaccination and beef quality assurance (BQA) treatment records (for example, treatments given and when).

Once you have individual animal information, Patterson points out that a producer can also use it to track production and performance data for making replacement heifer decisions, culling animals that have a history of dystocia or other problems, and tracking cow herd longevity.

**3. Market weights.** Patterson advocates having weights on calves, cows and bulls, at minimum by

group, with individual weights being even better. "This allows you to compare breakevens with market prices [dollars per hundredweight (cwt.) of calf sold], and it also can

serve as culling criteria of cows whose calves aren't producing satisfactory weaning weights," Patterson says.

**4. Pregnancy data.** Patterson advises pregnancy-checking the herd annually as a recordkeeping tool. He says, "Consider if 5% of the herd is open. That is costing you to keep those females in the herd. So it makes sense to pregnancy-check and then sort and market the open cattle."

**5. Calving data.** This should include both the calf and dam ID, a calving/dystocia score for making future culling decisions, birth date, birth weight, and deaths. Again, this allows for documentation of age and birth origin of the animals in the herd, and the data can be used as criteria to cull late-calving cows, Patterson says.

**6. Pasture usage.** This is a record you may not think of keeping, but Patterson says it can be a valuable tool for drought management. He suggests documenting when a pasture is used each year, precipitation levels and the stocking rate. Having this information can help you plan when and how to use pastures the following year and avoid negatively affecting range condition by using pastures at the same time every year. It also gives a record of historical stocking rates.

**7. Feed purchase records.** Given the current BSE situation and ban on particular feedstuffs, Patterson says, "I'd want this in my file. That way if you ever have a BSE incident, you can prove that you didn't feed high-risk materials (HRMs)." He advises keeping a record of the dates, supplier and feed tags to document that the feed used was legal at that time. Patterson says to keep past feed records for at least 10 years.

**8. Sire information.** Again, this is information all seedstock breeders keep, but commercial producers would do well to track it also. Patterson says that by documenting what bulls were with each group of cows, producers can better follow genetic goals and know which bull is producing quality progeny. If ever there is a problem sire, you will know which one it was.

**9. Enterprise costs.** To really understand the costs that go into your business, Patterson recommends breaking costs down

by enterprise (for example, cow-calf, feeders, crop or hayland, etc.). He says costs such as feed, maintenance, depreciation, interest, labor, etc., should be calculated for each enterprise.

**10. Enterprise revenues.**

Income for each enterprise should also be tracked. This includes cull cows, bulls, steers, heifers, feed, etc.

**Making it work**

Finally, once you have a complete set of records, you can analyze them to calculate unit cost of production [dollars per pound (lb.) of weaned calf], profit (revenue minus costs), and return on assets (profit or loss divided by dollars invested). This list of records will also allow you to assess weaning weights per cow exposed, calving rates, calving distribution, cow longevity/replacement rates and reproductive rates by age, as well as identify problem cows and evaluate marketing plans.

Most importantly, Patterson says, recordkeeping doesn't have to be hard. He points out that the Integrated Resource Management (IRM) Red Book is a start. Tools for analyzing data can include Standardized Performance Analysis (SPA) software available through university IRM programs or other spreadsheet software programs with which you are comfortable that calculate production and financial data.

Patterson admits recordkeeping can be a challenge, because everyone approaches it differently. But, he says, finding a system that works will ultimately help your ranch run more efficiently.

Patterson says producers should use three guidelines in designing their recordkeeping system:

- 1) make time for recordkeeping;
- 2) determine the herd information that will be most economical and feasible to collect; and
- 3) determine how you will use that information.

Patterson says, "A ranch is made up of several different components — natural resources, production levels, family, etc.," Patterson says. "Interestingly, stress and conflict are usually the factors that drive decision-making. But, with planning and management, producers can shape the way management decisions are made to be more effective. Having records can help producers make short- and long-term decisions."



**Editor's Note:** The American Angus Association has a variety of recordkeeping tools available to commercial cattlemen. Contact the Commercial Programs Department at (816) 383-5100 for information on the Beef Record Service (BRS), AngusSource<sup>SM</sup> and the BRS black books.

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3201 Frederick Ave. • Saint Joseph, MO 64506-2997  
phone: (816) 383-5200 • fax: (816) 233-6575  
office hours: (M-F) 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. (Central time)  
Web site: [www.angusbeefbulletin.com](http://www.angusbeefbulletin.com)

Staff are listed by name, phone extension and e-mail prefix. All direct phone numbers are "(816) 383-5..."; all e-mail addresses are "...@angusjournal.com"

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