

Strike Gold With On-Farm Tracking

Here's how ranchers make cattle information pay off.

Story by
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More and more producers are thinking of on-farm cattle tracking as a valuable management tool that helps them fine-tune all phases of their beef operations rather than a chore. On-farm tracking begins when a calf is born and the producer records its birth date in a calving book.

"That little piece of information is like a gold nugget being brought out of a river," says Kris Ringwall, North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension beef specialist. "After a producer identifies all of his calves and records their birth dates, his calving book is like a bag of gold."

For many producers, age and source verification are keys that unlock the doors to value-added marketing opportunities. But you can also find a pot of gold by tracking cattle performance at the ranch level. Following are five prime examples.

1. Cull low producers

"I'm an information junkie," Katie Hurst of Hunt Hill Cattle Co., admits. Katie and Cooper Hurst make extensive use of on-farm tracking to manage their 350-cow commercial operation in Woodville, Miss. For two years, the Hursts kept cattle records with calving books and record sheets. Throughout the past nine years, they've compiled information in their ranch computer using CattleMax software.

"I've never viewed keeping records as a burden. Quite the contrary, we think recordkeeping is one of the most valuable tools we have at our disposal," Katie says.

Angus genetics are the foundation of the Hunt Hill herd. Angus bulls are bred to F₁ Brahford cows to produce one-fourth Brahman-influenced heifers. These black baldie females with a touch of ear now make up 80% of the Hunt Hill herd. The black baldies are bred to

Angus bulls, and the Hursts retain ownership of the crossbred steers (and heifers that aren't selected as replacements) through a feedlot.

When the calves reach the feedyard, Hunt Hill animals receive electronic identification (EID) tags and the individual ID numbers are reported back to Katie. Individual performance records allow Katie and Cooper to track economic traits [quality grades, yield grades, carcass weight, average daily gain (ADG), etc.] of each calf back to its mother and sire. This feedlot data helps the Hursts make decisions on genetics when purchasing future herd bulls. The feedlot information also helps them plan future marketing strategies. And pinpointing the top-producing cows helps Hunt Hill keep replacement heifers from its best females.

"Over time, we're making significant financial improvement by culling the bottom 10% to 20% of our cows that are the big drag on profitability," Katie says. "This year, we will be very interested in using our feedlot data to look at the comparison between our AI (artificial insemination) calves and our natural service calves in the feedlot."

2. Track calving intervals

Kelly Unruh is a longtime fan of tracking cattle performance. Unruh uses Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software (CHAPS) to track the performance of his commercial Angus cattle at Prairie Diamond Ranch near Hebron, N.D. At birth, Unruh identifies each calf with a visual tag and sends his herd information to a computer system at the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association (NDBCIA).

The NDSU Extension service (in cooperation with the NDBCIA) sends producers managerial reports based on data generated by CHAPS. These reports help ranchers evaluate their herds.

The CHAPS program also provides performance benchmarks for all North Dakota herds enrolled in the service. Two of Unruh's

favorite benchmarks are calf birth distribution and pounds (lb.) of calf per cow exposed.

For example, on average, the CHAPS herd gives birth to 60% of its calves in the first 21 days of the calving season. Unruh's cows give birth to 80% of the herd's calves during the first 21 days of a 60-day calving season.

Keeping tabs on calving distribution helps spot reproductive diseases, management problems or nutritional deficiencies. If at least 60% of a cow herd doesn't calve within the first 21 days of the calving season, a producer should ask why, Ringwall suggests. Records also help spot problems with cow-calf management. If an excessive number of calves die early in life, management changes may be needed.

Weight per day of age (WDA) is another benchmark that can be tracked. Calves on ranches in the CHAPS program average 2.4 lb. per day. Unruh's commercial Angus steers have an average 3.5 lb. per day of age. Tracking his calves' performance is helping Unruh make decisions on genetics.

"I'm moving toward straight-Angus cows," the North Dakota rancher says. "No cow does the job like a straight Angus. By tracking my calves' feedlot performance with EID tags, I find they do as well as crossbred calves."

With birth records available, Unruh looks forward to participating in age- and source-verified marketing programs. "All of this tracking begins with my calving book," Unruh says.

3. Compare weaning weights

Gordon Burkhalter of Clanton, Ala., records calf births and sends his information to the Alabama Beef Cattle Improvement Association (ABCIA), where it's stored in a central computer.

Burkhalter uses cattle tracking a few different ways:

Marketing heifers. ABCIA holds eight replacement heifer sales. Information available on these heifers includes date of birth, farm of

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At birth, Circle A Angus Ranch calves receive two ear tags. A large plastic tag in one ear includes the mother's number and an individual ID number. A small metal tag in the other ear has a permanent ID number as a backup in case the plastic tag is lost.

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origin, breed percentages, individual 205-day weights, and ratios.

Selecting replacement heifers. Producers may decide to retain heifers from their top-producing cows and heifers born early in the calving season.

Culling low-producing cows based on 205-day adjusted weights of calves.

As he decides which cows to cull, Burkhalter looks closely at weaning weights. "When I cull cows, the ones with the lowest weaning weights are the first to go," he notes. "As a result, my weaning weights have increased by 100 pounds."

Burkhalter picks his replacement females from heifers born early in the

calving season. He also sells heifers in ABCIA sales that require age and source verification. These source-verified commercial heifers bring an average of \$100-\$125 per head over heifer prices at local feeder calf sales.

Burkhalter's steers are marketed in a source-verified sale organized by the

Alabama Feeder Cattle Marketing Association. Working with a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) grant, the Alabama Beef Connection (ABC) is placing 28,000 EID tags in calves sold through this year's sales. The calves will be marketed by truckloads, and ABC coordinator Josh Elmore is tracking the cattle by EID tags through processing. The purpose of the program is to obtain individual carcass data to help producers make better decisions on genetics.

"Our primary goal is to dispel the myth that Alabama doesn't produce good feeder cattle," Elmore says.

4. Boost sales

"We have eight years of records in our computer, and every decision we make is based on those records," says Kevin Powell, cattle manager of Duck Farm Inc., Madison, Va.

In early 2006, Duck Farm began using EID tags on all of the farm's commercial Angus animals. As cattle pass through the working chute, Powell uses a reader and AgInfoLink software to

Simple, yet effective

Cooper and Katie Hurst of Hunt Hill Co. use a simple, but effective, tracking system on their ranch near Woodville, Miss.

Every cow is identified with a permanent white ear tag, and that tag number is listed in the computer. Each cow also wears a metal numbered tag. Most of these are Bang's tags, but if a Bang's tag is lost, it is replaced with another metal tag. Both numbers are entered in the computer and used as a cross reference when either permanent tag is lost.

Katie enters the following information about each cow:

- Date of birth
- Purchase information
- Brand or physical characteristics
- Category (such as 2002 replacement, 2003 replacement, etc.)
- Date, price and reason cow is sold

After all cows calve, the Hursts work the herd and tag the calves. Each calf receives a birth number that is the calf crop year and its dam's number (for example 06/185).

- Feeder calves receive colored tags with numbers running from 1 to the final number of calves (for example 1 to 200).
- Calves that have health problems at the farm aren't sent to the

automatically record weights and health procedures while working cattle. He also continues to use CattlePro software that holds eight years of Duck Farm's herd management data.

Both software systems allow Powell to export and import data from Microsoft® Excel spreadsheets. Powell works with AgInfoLink and the Southeastern Livestock Network for source and age verification. This year, two loads of Duck Farm calves (with EID tags) are being marketed in special source-verified sales through the Central Virginia Cattleman's Association.

When dry weather earlier this year forced Duck Farm to quickly reduce its cow herd from 700 cows down to 600, Powell used the records to make culling decisions. Duck Farm retains 70% of its heifer calves as female replacements.

In recent years, Powell has used ultrasound on heifers to help determine carcass characteristics. He also uses the ultrasound information to evaluate the farm's Angus sires. Buyers are beginning to request carcass data, and Powell can send this information by e-mail.

"Buyers seem primarily interested in information about intramuscular fat and backfat. They want animals that will grade Choice, Yield Grade (YG) 2 to 3," Powell says.

5. Evaluate genetics

Circle A Angus Ranch manages 8,000 head of commercial Angus females on more

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feedlot and are identified with a tag of a different color than tags for animals bound for the feedlot.

- Replacement heifers receive a white cow tag numbered with calf crop year followed by corresponding birth number in the herd. For example, the second heifer born in 2006 would be 06/02. This number lets Katie know at a glance the birth year of each cow.

- After calves reach the feedlot, they receive electronic identification (EID) tags. The feedlot sends back a list of EID numbers matched with the original ranch tag numbers. When the calves are weighed, sorted and finally harvested, the feedlot sends back information based on the EID number. Carcass data from the packer (live weight, carcass weight, quality grade, yield grade, ribeye area and price per pound) is entered into the computer. With this information, Katie calculates performances for all of the cows and generates a computer report listing each cow with her calves' carcass data by year.

"You can put in as much or as little information as you want. An ear tag number and date of birth might be enough for some people. If you are an information junkie like me, you put in everything you can," Katie says.

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than 30,000 acres in four locations. With many animals spread over a large area, tracking is essential. But on-farm tracking systems don't need to be complicated or expensive, points out Circle A commercial marketing manager Jeff Windett.

At birth, Circle A calves receive two ear tags. A large plastic tag in one ear

includes the mother's number and an individual ID number. A small metal tag in the other ear has a permanent ID number as a backup in case the plastic tag is lost. When calves are sent to the feedlot, they receive another plastic tag and an EID tag that helps retrieve feedlot and carcass data.

Circle A uses carcass data from these steers to tighten its formula for consistent beef quality, uniformity and profitability. Circle A also sells bulls and heifers and organizes feeder calf sales for customers' animals that carry the ranch's genetics.

Windett encourages Circle A's bull customers to track their cattle in order to

make the right decisions in buying herd sires.

"I want to sell a customer the right bull for his herd," Windett says. "But I need benchmarks to see what his cows are doing. If he has data and tells me he's concerned about producing larger ribeye area, adding more marbling or increasing weaning weights, I can narrow a list of 300 bulls down to 75 that meet his needs. If a producer can only tell me that he has a set of cows and needs a good bull, we're shooting in the dark."

Good news for PVPs

Each of these producers is looking forward to marketing cattle through U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Process Verified Programs (PVPs). The reopening of Asian beef markets to U.S. beef is good news for participants in PVPs. A USDA PVP provides suppliers of agricultural products or services the opportunity to assure customers of their ability to provide consistent-quality products. PVPs are limited to programs where specified process-verified points are supported by a documented quality management system.

Suppliers with approved USDA PVPs are able to make marketing claims associated with their process-verified points, such as age, source, feeding practices or other raising and processing claims. For example, if a producer markets animals through a PVP that claims the animals are younger than 20 months of age, the claim could later be audited with proof of birth dates required. There are many PVPs available, and producers must choose the one that best fits their animals and marketing plans.

AngusSource® is a PVP for Angus-sired calves that documents source, group age and a minimum of 50% Angus genetics.

"For producers that use registered Angus bulls and are willing to enroll their cattle, AngusSource opens a lot of doors without requiring a lot of record-keeping," Josh Elmore, Alabama Beef Connection, says.

For information on PVPs and AngusSource, see <http://processverified.usda.gov/> or www.angussource.com.