Why Keep Records on Your Cow Herd?

By John Paterson, Executive Director of Producer Education

The beef cattle industry continues to provide a safe, high quality and consistent product to consumers by addressing animal health and food safety issues. Management techniques learned over the years, such as crossbreeding, genetic improvement, implants, and nutritional manipulation, have been adopted to improve beef production efficiency. However, one key to ranch success is to develop a record-keeping system to track economic viability and to assist in making more informed decisions about production practices.

Why keep records?

Records are needed not only for legal, financial and taxation purposes, but also for maintaining a permanent record of the farm business, analyzing the business, monitoring day-to-day production practices and marketing options, and for future planning.

The two sets of performance records important to commercial production are total herd performance and individual performance. Total herd performance is the combined reproductive and growth performance of each animal in the herd. The keys to total herd performance are:

• Total growth of all individuals in the herd
• The number of open cows
• Length of calving season
• Death loss

Individual cow records should be kept when it is economical and practical to do so. Keep the records uncomplicated by recording only necessary observations. These records should include:

• Cow ID (ID can incorporate age)
• Date of first exposure to bull
• Results of pregnancy examination — early (will calve in about 40 days), medium (will calve in about 20 days), late (will calve 60 days after the first calving)
• Dates of first and last calving
• Problems at calving time (pulled calf, weak calf, cow did not claim calf)
• Age at branding, vaccinations, treatment for sickness, antibiotics used weaning dates.
• Weaning weight (if possible; if not, an estimate of size — large, medium, small)

According to the Beef 2011 (USDA-APHIS), 83 percent of all operations had some form of a record keeping system as herd size increases, because analysis of production records without a computer is time consuming and cumbersome.

Larger operations with more than 200 cows were more likely to have used a record keeping system (95 percent) and also a computer (48 percent). The record keeping program can be as simple as the IRM Redbook or more complex with the use of a computer – which is a necessity as herd size increases, because analysis of production records without a computer is time consuming and cumbersome.

The following table gives the results of a survey of Montana ranchers evaluating the kinds of records kept and also compares BQA-certified (Beef Quality Assurance) ranchers to non-BQA certified ranchers.

Significant differences were found between BQA certified producers and non-BQA certified ranchers regarding the types of records maintained on the ranch.

One of the rapidly growing areas that requires thorough record keeping because of consumer demand is third party auditing of ranch production practices.

Examples of four certified marketing programs that require third party auditing of ranchers production practices (IM Global, 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Source Verification</th>
<th>BQA Certified</th>
<th>Non-BQA Certified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verification</td>
<td>Exporting U.S. beef to any of the 27 countries within the EU requires the product must come from cattle verified cattle verified by a third-party to have never received any hormone growth promotants during their lifecycle.</td>
<td>Verified Natural Beef (VNB)</td>
<td>USDA Grass-fed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verified Natural Beef (VNB)</td>
<td>The USDA’s grass-fed standard requires grass and forage to be the sole feed source consumed for the lifetime of the animal with the exception of milk consumed prior to weaning.</td>
<td>CAPA</td>
<td>IRM-Redbook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USDA Grass-fed</td>
<td>The VNB program allows cattle to be eligible for buyers and brands seeking specialy markets requiring natural beef. The standard incorporates three prohibited aspects of production — hormone growth promotants, antibiotics and animal by-products.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 2016 Redbook features:

• International Letter Designations for Animal Identification
• Calving records
• Revised Beef Quality Assurance Guidelines
• Injection site quality control
• Health records
• Pasture usage
• SPA (Standardized Performance Analysis) performance measures
• Cattle sales
• AI breeding records
• Pasture usage
• Health records
• Pasture usage
• SPA (Standardized Performance Analysis) performance measures
• Cattle sales
• AI breeding records
• Pasture usage
• Health records
• Pasture usage
• SPA (Standardized Performance Analysis) performance measures
• Cattle sales
• AI breeding records

Customize your Redbook in quantities of 100 books or more. Volume discounts available.