Ninety seconds and counting: the cost of labor in cattle ID

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service

BeefTalk

The development of an effective record system for the cattle industry is an interesting thought. Obviously more than one goodhearted soul has injected their comments into the system so the pros and cons will be weighed from all angles.

Two years ago, the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association and the NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center collaborated on development of a new program entitled SmartCows(tm). The goal of SmartCows(tm) was to aid producers who were not currently involved with records to get involved.

SmartCows(tm) included a full lineup of services, beginning with the labor and equipment and followed with a complete data processing report through the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software (CHAPS). The initial effort resulted in a look at 15 herds that were processed through the system. Several thoughts have emerged over time.

CHAPS currently processes data from several hundred herds across the country. These herds are somewhat unique, being developed under the concept of a total working package. Starting from scratch is not easy.

Currently, a major point being made across the country is the urgency and speed needed to implement a national identification system for livestock (cattle, chicken, bison, geese, hogs, etc.). The beef industry has encouraged ID systems since early domestication--but certainly not with the current passion.

Developing a national ID system has many challenges, inhibited mostly by labor and expense. The SmartCows(tm) experience bears out this fact. Using rounded numbers to make some points, these difficulties can be discussed. The NDBCIA and the DREC have not reached their goal of 10,000 cows. In fact, just over 10 percent of the goal has been reached in the two years. This is not because of a lack of cows.

The demand is there for the program. The SmartCows(tm) crew could work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, if they wanted. The hang-up has been the implementation of technology in an isolated rural setting. Simply put, things don't work like they should.

Our experience has indicated good success chute side, while standing on cement and surrounded by four walls. In fact, most anything can be worked out under such conditions. Moving into the mainstream cow/calf business has proven more difficult. Seldom do more than 100 calves get worked a day. Many times the lack of a suitable environment has hampered the implementation of electronic technology. But given that, the industry must still move on, meet the current challenges and then some.

So what is a realistic goal? For this coming season, I believe 300 calves would be a full days work. At 90 seconds a calf, 300 calves would take 27,000 seconds or 450 minutes or seven and a half hours. Given a reasonable workday, a 15 minute break in the morning and afternoon, the eight-hour workday is up. That is only one-third of the identification equation.

Before the producer can work his cattle, they need to get moved into a corral or suitable penning facility. Once the data is collected, it needs to be assimilated in a format that can be verified and validated at all levels of any identification system.

The roundup of cattle (by the rancher) and the travel time to get SmartCows(tm) equipment to and from the site adds another eight-hour day, or 16 hours in one day. So, in reality, we have a day to prepare to process calves, the actual processing of the calves and a day to verify the correctness of the data that went into the program.

How much time is involved? The total roundup labor (bringing cattle in, sorting and returning to pasture) is 24 hours, which equals the rancher and spouse plus one family member or neighbor. These three, plus five people for the SmartCows(tm) program, brings the processing crew to eight. Eight people times eight hours is 64 hours. Data verification requires one person for an additional eight hours.

The total labor time to process the calves is 96 hours. The labor bill for 300 calves at $12 per hour is $1,152, or $3.84 per calf. If we were to extrapolate that out to the 1,000,000 calves in North Dakota, the labor bill to work all of North Dakota's calves is $3,840,000.

Some would say regional sites or sale barns could serve in the same capacity, but that makes no difference because all the previous days work still needs to be done, electronically or not. Can regional sites or sale barns perform these services gratis?

Next week, the price of technology will be added, but for now, "Can you work a calf in less than 90 seconds per calf from setup to tear down?"

May you find all your USAIP ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at *www.BeefTalk.com*. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to *www.CHAPS2000.com* on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0182.

Labor Charges for Working 300 Calves*

Processing Time	Data Validation Time	Labor Costs at $12/hour
3 persons at eight hours	24 hours	$288
8 persons at eight hours	64 hours	$768
1 person at eight hours	8 hours	$96
12 persons at eight hours	96 hours	$1,152

* Dickinson Research Extension Center's SmartCow program processing calves at 90 seconds per calf.