

August 9, 2001



NDSU Extension Service

BeefTalk: Attention to Detail Necessary for Quality Beef Cow Records

By Kris Ringwall, Extension Beef Specialist,

Success in business begins with the knowledge upon which management decisions can be based. The beef industry is no different. Knowledge in the cow-calf business is based on good records--records that contain data that are timely, correct and complete for the owner or manager.

Within the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software (CHAPS) program, Doni Tibor supervises all the central processing of records received by the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association. She processes individual cow records for producers generating data, which becomes the knowledge producers can make management decisions from.

There are common problems that crop up, according to Doni. Most of the

pitfalls can be eliminated by taking proper precautions during the initial setup of the recordkeeping system. She said there are 10 major concerns that producers need to pay particular attention to in order to get the proper information back--as soon as possible. At the top of the list are concerns about inventory and identification -- how many cows, calves and bulls are actually in the herd and how are the individual animals within the herd identified?

As an inventory based program, CHAPS tracks cows and bulls for their entire productive life. This is easier said than done, because many producers neglect to use preprinted input sheets that confirm or deny the real existence of a cow with a particular number.

Counting cows is not the problem. Reciting the correct number for 100 cows is the problem. If incorrect numbers are recorded or ear tags changed, additional numbers may be added to the herd. Computers count numbers, not cows, so all of a sudden more cow numbers exist than there are actual cows. The fix is preprinted animal worksheets with consistent and prompt reconciling of all missing or incorrect cow identification tags.

The problem can be further compounded if animals do not have a unique identification number. No duplicates are allowed. In some herds, ear tags are reused. Again, computers can't report what is not inputted correctly. Another common problem involves sires. Everyone remembers to put the bulls with the cows to produce calves, but recording that date is often forgotten. Approximate bull turn out dates only magnify the errors in calculated herd reproductive data.

Another must in a performance program is knowing calf birth dates. Rate of gain and adjusted weights mean nothing if the birth date is estimated. The

best solution for knowing birth dates is a good calving book that has the information transcribed to a software program in a very timely fashion. The most common missing data are the sex of the calf, actual weaning weight of the calf, the weaning date of the calf and the age of the mother cow.

Granted, most calves have that information, but when the data is transcribed into the computer, individual calves missing data really hurt the total accuracy of the herd data and can result in more contemporary groups--or at least decrease the numbers within a contemporary group. No one wants to make management decisions based on inaccurate, incomplete data.

The biggest problem area is the culling information. I would be a rich man if I had a dime for every time a producer throws away data on culled cows. Accurate records require the reporting of all cows, those currently producing and those that have been culled--and why

The individual cow record is history--and that history will have an direct economic impact on every cow-calf producer. You have better opportunities for communicating with potential buyers of cows, calves, bulls, pairs, etc. if you have a rock-solid, well-kept record book. Those good records will also present opportunities for you to improve your herd and its management.

Remember that the shortest pencil is better than the longest memory. Is your data on your cows fact or fiction? Perception and reality could be one, but when sales opportunities arise, the communication opportunities are so much greater with accurate records.

May you find all your 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 BT0051.

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