

The 2015 cow production year is over with the weaning of calves. But now is a key time to review last year's production data and use it as a tool for making management decisions in 2016. How well do you use your production data to make management decision? I found this timely article by Sandy Johnson in the Kansas State Research and Extension November 2015 Beef Tips newsletter. Give it some thought as you prepare for the coming production year. The "Redbook" is a convenient way to record data. Just remember the old saying: If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.

### **Tally Time – Use herd records to drive decisions**

Sandy Johnson, Kansas State University Extension Livestock Specialist

Few people really "enjoy" keeping records but having the records when you need them can be a great help. Cow/calf operations require considerable capital investment and must manage in the face of rising prices, regulatory uncertainty and price volatility. A good set of records can inform decisions and be a great asset in troubleshooting. In the case of disasters they can provide the ready documentation needed for assistance programs.

Legislation aimed at reducing the development of antibiotic resistance will now require producers to retain copies of veterinary feed directives for a period of two years. The silver lining to any required records could be getting producers to collect and analyze more data about their operation than they have in the past.

The "RedBook" was created to help producers have a place to record, on the go, all the day to day happenings that can be useful for management decisions in a cow/calf operation. The calf information and calendar pages take up the bulk of the Redbook but there are a number of other pages that are extremely useful. Often times we might use a few features of such a tool and overlook all the other useful pieces. Whether in this format or another, producers should strive to collect and use all the data represented by these forms.

Which of the following do you collect?

- Cowherd inventory, beginning of fiscal year, start of breeding season
- Bull inventory and breeding soundness exams
- Pasture usage
- SPA Performance Measures
- Body Condition Score Record – weaning, pre-calving, calving, breeding
- Calving Activity – tracks calving distribution for various age or management groups
- Calf health record
- Weaning data
- Cow Health record
- Treatment record
- Cattle movement worksheet
- Cattle Sales
- Death losses
- Supplement Record

- Precipitation Record

The health/vaccination record sheet includes detailed information about the specific product, serial number, lot number, expiration date, withdrawal date, site of administration. All key information to have if there was some reaction to a vaccine or if needed as part of documenting the vaccination history of a group of animals to aid marketing.

The treatment record includes similar information as the vaccination record and helps ensure that appropriate withdrawal times have passed before an animal is sold. We all want a high quality, safe food supply for our families and other consumers. This type of documentation, if shared with consumers, could build consumer confidence in our product.

The Redbook is also available as an Excel file with all the same record sheets. The Excel version could serve as a backup to the paper copy since Redbooks have been known to meet with tragic fates in washing machines and mud puddles.

Those that are more tech savvy may want to set up some of their own record sheets using features such as Google docs. In an area with good smartphone coverage, one producer uses this method for a number of items including tracking hay inventory as it is fed, animal treatments records and group procedures.

There is no one right way, however, relying strictly on memory is subject to sudden and unexpected failure. The process of recording information can actually be beneficial and draw attention toward the ways that information can help the operation. Outside demands may be the only reason some producers keep any records, but increasingly many businesses are finding power in data to drive decisions. Look for opportunities to inform your decisions with data.

You can find the spreadsheet version or order Redbooks directly at this site  
<http://www.beefusa.org/redbook.aspx>

Additional resources:

- UNL Beef website: [beef.unl.edu](http://beef.unl.edu)
- UNL BeefWatch (monthly e-newsletter that you can subscribe to):  
<http://newsroom.unl.edu/announce/beef>
- UNL BeefWatch Podcasts (these are more intimate chats with some of the authors of the BeefWatch articles, you can also subscribe or download them):  
<http://beef.unl.edu/beefwatch-podcast>

Steve Tonn, Nebraska Extension Educator – Beef Systems