Using Benchmarks to Evaluate Your Herd

In today’s agriculture, knowledge is power. Production data provides producers with the knowledge necessary for management decisions. The old saying of “If you can’t measure it, You can’t manage it” is still true and even more valuable today.

The fall will soon be here and for many preparing grain bins, combines, trucks and grain carts will be their first thoughts. However for cow calf producers data collection and analysis on their cow herd should also be an important fall task. Maybe consider combining data collection with pre-weaning vaccinations rather than at weaning time. This may spread out the work load and make it easier to collect the data.

What are some key data to collect? Number of cows exposed for breeding, average cow age, pregnancy percentage, calving percentage, weaning percentage, average weaning age, average weaning weight, weight per day of age, adjusted 205 day weight, pounds weaned per cow exposed, replacement percentage, culling percentage, cow weight, calves born at 21 days, calves born at 42 days, calves born at 63 days, calves born after 63 days, calf death loss %, % heifers calved early, % heifers calved at 21 days, % heifers calved at 42 days, % cows calved at 21 days, % cows calved at 42 days, and average cow condition score at weaning.

Why is data collection so important? Because it allows you to then use a powerful management tool called benchmarking. Benchmarking allows producers to measure their production performance compared to previous years and/or other producers. For cow calf producers it is the management process of comparing their herd’s production performance to the average of a set of benchmark herds to identify their herd’s strengths and weaknesses. Benchmarking can help direct your management efforts toward critical production factors.

The North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association has developed the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software (CHAPS) program to help producers understand cow calf records. Search the internet for CHAPS 2000 for more information on the software program.

One of the values of the program is the five-year averages that provide benchmarks for CHAPS and non-CHAPS producers. The benchmarks provide valuable information on how your herd competes within the industry. I have attached a copy of the benchmarks from the CHAPS herds with a total of 88,000 cows exposed to bulls and processed from 2010 to 2014. These benchmarks are from larger sized herds than what you may have but why not compare your herd to the best.

The current benchmark value indicates the average CHAPS producer had a Pregnancy Rate of 93.1%; Pregnancy Loss .65%; Calving Rate 92.5%; Calf Death Loss 3.4%; Weaning Rate 89.8%; Average Weaning Wt. 558 lbs.; and Lbs. Weaned/Cow Exposed 495. See the attached table for more benchmarks.

How do your production records compare to these benchmarks? Where did your herd beat the benchmark averages? Where did the benchmark averages beat your herd’s numbers?
Examine your herd’s weaknesses one by one to see if you can do something to improve. Depending on the situation, it may take a whole year or more to remove or change a major weakness, but benchmarking should help you to focus your limited management time. As you remove your weaknesses from your herd, herd profits tend to go up.

Another step beyond production benchmarking is to do financial benchmarking on your farm. To truly benefit from financial benchmarking your farming operation internally and externally to peer farms, membership in an organization committed to this concept as a best practice can yield the most benefits.

Additional resources:

- UNL Beef website: 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

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