

Write it down: Record keeping for the stocker producer

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Most beef producers have heard the phrase “you can’t improve what you don’t measure” over and over again, but many producers still haven’t taken advantage of how record keeping can improve their profitability. If a producer doesn’t know they’re spending thousands of dollars on feed and not realizing increases in gain, or that they’re repeating vaccinations which have already been given, they might not realize the profits that might be slipping away. Another added benefit of record keeping is consumer piece of mind. Today’s beef consumer wants to know more about where their food comes from and how that animal was treated. Record keeping is very important in helping us tell our beef story to the consumer. Producers may even realize additional profits from age and source verification programs as a result, or producers willing to pay premiums for local beef.

The best place to begin a record keeping system is with the background of calves as arrive on the ranch. If a group of calves is purchased the first piece of information recorded should be as much of their past history as can be provided. This may have a big impact on how you handle the cattle. In addition to the place of origin of the cattle, any known genetic information, such as sire breed or the predominant breed of the cowherd, should be recorded. Any known EPD information from sires should also be recorded as well. Previous management and nutrition should be documented as well. It is important to know the health program: vaccinations received and when, treatment and illness information, as well as previous implant strategies. In addition, any age and source-verified program documentation should also be added to each group of calves’ files.

The next step in the development of a record keeping system involves identification of each animal. Individual animal identification is important for maintaining health and treatment records. Often cattle may have been previously identified, and individual ID may be as simple as adding previous tag numbers to your files. There are many options for individual animal ID, and it is important to choose the form that best fits the needs of an operation. If facilities or time are not available for identifying each animal, at minimum, animals receiving antibiotics or other medications with withdrawal times should be identified. This is important to be certain that those times are adhered to. This may be as simple as adding a paint mark or ear notch to treated calves.

Health is another area important to record. These management records can be obtained for both groups and individual animals. For each group of cattle, receiving and processing dates should be recorded. Along with each processing date, products administered, dosage, location, and route of administration should also be recorded. It is also a good practice to record lot numbers for each product administered. Individual records should also be maintained for calves receiving individual treatments. In addition to the product and date, the symptoms that lead to treatment should also be recorded. This may prove important if similar symptoms are noted in the future. It is always important to maintain a relationship with your local veterinarian to ensure proper treatments are given in the correct dosage.

Nutrition and performance records are often overlooked in the record keeping plan. These records may be most vital to improving the profitability of an operation. It is important to have an accurate way to measure performance and to record in and out weights for each group of

calves. Ration ingredients, nutritional value, and amount fed are also important to record. From these gains and feed conversions can be calculated, as well as break even prices. The Mississippi State University Extension Service recently released an app that can be used to calculate break even prices and cost of gain. The app is quick and easy to use, and requires a minimal number of inputs, and is available for free download on iTunes.

Choosing a system to maintain records is almost as difficult as deciding which records to maintain. There are numerous options available ranging from very high tech to very low tech. Numerous companies, breed associations, and Extension programs offer computerized record keeping systems with a wide range of difficulty levels and options. Many producers opt for pocket record books or other forms of written records. Whichever record system you may choose, it is important that those records are backed up. While pocket record books are convenient to take records in the field, they are also very easy to forget in a pocket before it goes in the wash or drop into a mud puddle.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when determining which records to keep and the system to keep them is to choose records that are relatively easy to accurately maintain. If a system or records are too cumbersome or difficult, it's unlikely that they'll be maintained for a long period. While starting a record keeping program from scratch, or organizing the traditional rancher's filing system (aka the dash of the ranch truck) might seem daunting it surely will pay dividends in the end.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit msucares.com/livestock/beef.