

Production records in cow-calf operations

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Abstract

Production records can be used to measure herd performance. They identify potential areas for improvement and lead to management decisions to address these areas. These decisions are then evaluated by monitoring performance with production records, continuing the cycle.

A variety of software programs can be used to manage production records efficiently. Spreadsheet programs are more suited to individual management events, while database programs allow one to analyze farms both across multiple years on the herd level and on an individual-cow basis. With both types of programs, appropriate reports can be generated for the management team to evaluate and analyze together.

Key words: cow-calf, records, management

Résumé

Les relevés de production peuvent être utilisés pour évaluer la performance au niveau du troupeau. Ces relevés identifient les aspects nécessitant des améliorations et conduisent à des modifications de la régie pour trouver une solution à ces problèmes. Ces décisions sont alors évaluées à la lumière du suivi du rendement basé sur les données de production continuant ainsi le cycle.

Plusieurs logiciels peuvent être utilisés afin de gérer les données de production efficacement. Les tableurs sont mieux adaptés aux événements de gestion au niveau individuel alors que les bases de données permettent d'analyser des fermes sur plusieurs années au niveau du troupeau de même qu'au niveau individuel. Avec ces deux types de logiciels, des rapports pertinents peuvent être générés permettant à l'équipe de gestion d'évaluer et d'analyser leurs résultats ensemble.

Introduction

Today's cattlemen and veterinarians have more information at their disposal than at any other time in history. That being said, not all of this information is good, and some of the good information may not be appropriate for every situation. One of the biggest challenges we face as veterinarians is figuring out how we can help our clients sort through this massive amount

of information on their way to meeting their goals. Using computerized production records in itself is not the entire answer, but is one factor that we can use to move towards the answer.

Implementation

The implementation of a record-keeping system can be challenging. Like most new ideas, its best chance of success relies on the proper timing of the recommendation of its use. The opportunity usually presents in 2 ways. The first is during an outbreak, in which the farmer has a teachable moment that can be seized upon. This can be a quicker method, but is also one that must be nurtured so that it does not fall apart once the outbreak has passed. The second method is built upon a long-term relationship of trust between veterinarian and rancher. As this trust strengthens, a veterinarian can become part of the management team, then the recommendation to implement production records is considered more strongly and will eventually be accepted, even after multiple failed attempts. This method provides for a more stable start to the process, but both ways can provide for successful implementation of a record-keeping system.

Management Event Reports

The veterinarian is on the farm for a lot of the key management events that take place throughout the production year. This gives us an opportunity to not only help work through the event, but also allows us to readily record the data points that are collected at that time. However, if we only record the information, we miss a prime opportunity to provide the rancher with simple useful reports. These reports are most easily made by creating a template in a spreadsheet program, such as Excel or Numbers. The advantage of these programs is the inherent flexibility to make changes to the templates you create. One does not have to have any information prior to arrival on the farm, just simply record the data points that you are interested in. From there, one can use the functions within the programs to summarize the data into information, as well as easily present that information in graph form, if desired. These simple reports are especially useful for analyzing pregnancy examinations, weaning data, and as part of a comprehensive heifer development plan.

Comprehensive Production Reports

While very useful for single events, the spreadsheet reports lose their simplicity if one wants to monitor a herd and its individual cows on an annual basis. For this, a database program is much more appropriate, such as CowCalf5 or CowSense. Many more of these database programs exist, each with its own pros and cons. Individual preferences will help one decide which program will work best for him or her.

To analyze records with these programs, a few minimum data points are required. For permanent dam data, one needs to have recorded an individual ID for the cow and an approximate birthdate of the cow. For each production year, we record at least a few basic data points for the key management events. At calving, record the date of birth, sex, and individual ID of the calf paired to its dam. Around weaning, record a weight and the date it was obtained. At pregnancy examination, record the body condition score of the cow and her pregnancy status. It is also important to record when an animal enters (i.e. purchased) or leaves (i.e. sold or dies) the herd. With these minimal data points, one is able to analyze both the production of the herd, as well as individual cows and calves. Obviously, lots of other data can be collected as well, but in the beginning, it may be easier to start with the basics and add on as you develop experience working with the programs. It is also worth noting that the rancher only has to record the calving data and herd entries/exits. The rest can all be collected during visit-weaning/pregnancy examinations.

Once the above data are entered into the database, the program will provide you with numerous pre-made reports, as well as customizable reports. Most of the herd-level reports focus on the key management events—calving, weaning, and pregnancy examinations. The programs are also able to track cows individually over multiple years; example information would include average calving date, number of calves weaned, and a

Most Probable Producing Ability (MPPA), which is one method to compare cows within a herd to each other. These programs can also help generate a Standardized Performance Analysis (SPA). SPA is an approach to uniformly analyze a herd by tracking a few key data points and calculations; it contains both a production portion and a financial portion. In addition, most of the database programs allow you to import and export data to and from a spreadsheet program. This feature can greatly improve your data entry, as well as allowing for more customized reports.

At first, the volume and depth of the reports can be overwhelming. Over time, the method I have found most suitable for presenting this information to ranchers is to prepare a bound report book that can be discussed in person at an end-of-production-year meeting. The book should be laid out in a logical order that makes sense to the veterinarian and rancher. The meeting is the key to making production record analysis work for a ranch. The record books help to remind the ranch of its past, examine its current position, and can be used to identify potential areas for improvement in the future. Without a year-end meeting to discuss the report, it is easy for all of the information that was generated to turn back into data points.

Conclusion

Production records are one tool that can help in the evolution of ranches over time. They are not the answer in themselves, but provide a way for us to monitor the decisions we make. Depending on the scenario, different computer programs are available to turn data points into usable information for both individual management events and multiple production years. In the end though, it is how the management team uses this information that will determine the success of the ranch.