

# Direct Returns from IRM Implementation in Beef Practice

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I have been involved in IRM for the last seven years, both as a practicing veterinarian participating in local producer projects and as co-chairman of the Idaho IRM program. This involvement has given me the opportunity to see various types of IRM programs across the country, and I am very excited about the potential benefits for both veterinary medicine and the livestock industry. I would like to share with you my thoughts on the IRM concept and how our profession can function within IRM. I encourage each of you to become involved in your state's programs and judge for yourselves the value of IRM.

What is IRM? Several years ago I asked a group of about 400 food animal veterinarians if they were familiar with the name Integrated Resource Management, or IRM. Only two or three people in the room indicated that they were, and this meeting was being held in a state that was one of the four original pilot groups for IRM development. Since then IRM is slowly becoming more familiar to both veterinary practitioners and their clients. Why has so little attention been given to IRM by our profession until very recently? One reason might be that we have no idea what IRM really means. We read all about the various projects but they don't seem to have much in common. The IRM concept is extremely flexible, and there are as many different programs as there are groups involved. This diversity is exciting and allows the programs to fit the needs of producers all over the country. However, it sometimes makes the whole idea very confusing. We all seem to be talking about different programs that appear to be unrelated in any basic way. No one is sure what IRM is or how they as practitioners fit into the program.

Before I discuss the possible benefits to be derived from the IRM concept, we need to come up with some definitions. First, what is IRM? I like to think of IRM as a system that speeds up the transfer and adoption of technology between the researcher and the producer. The cooperation and interaction of all allied groups (university, veterinary, ag lending, private agricultural industry, independent consultants, etc) at the producer level is what makes IRM different from all other attempts to convince the producer to utilize new and existing technology. IRM is a tool to develop answers to various management problems facing the livestock producer. It is not a specific project or set of recommendations, but the process by which these recommendations were developed. No livestock produc-

tion problem is limited to a single area of expertise. Unless we are truly qualified in all of the other disciplines in agriculture, we need help in developing the sophisticated management programs that producers are beginning to demand. In its simplest form, IRM is a way to bring together experts in the various agricultural disciplines to work with a livestock producer in designing an integrated management plan. The goal of IRM is to increase the producer's profitability.

Another term we often use is allied industries. Many IRM programs use this term to describe feed and pharmaceutical company representatives and sales staff. I feel that the term should include everyone in agriculture except the producer. We either raise the livestock or work for the person who does. Each of us has an important role to play on any comprehensive management team.

Idaho's brand of IRM has a few simple rules that we think should be followed if the program is to work in the real world. First, the allied industry people must be involved at the local level. Programs that deal with just university personnel are doomed to failure in the long run because they can only work with a small number of producers and for a very short time. When the project is over, the team goes back to the university and leaves the producer stranded with no one to continue the program. Management teams using local people will always be in place and can work with potentially all of the producers in the area. Individually, the local people already work with virtually all the producers.

The second requirement is that the management problems to be dealt with should be perceived and identified by the producer as important. Even if the producer does not recognize the basic underlying causes, we must start with his perceived problems and work from there. We cannot go to him and say "trust me, I know what your problems are and I am there to solve them". A lot of good management ideas have died because we did not bother to ask the producer if he thought they were good ideas.

Any changes we recommend should be measurable, and the yardstick that we use is an increase in profitability. For many years our goal was to increase production, but this ignores the concept of efficiency of production. And measuring actual profit depends too much on market conditions and other factors that we have no control over. Increasing efficiency makes him more profitable at any level

of actual profit.

Within the last ten years, the livestock producer has made it very clear to the university extension services across the country that he does not want little bits and pieces of information thrown at him in a random fashion. He wants the data presented in a complete, "integrated" package that he can use tomorrow. The IRM program has been developed in response to the producer's demands. A tremendous amount of time, manpower, interest, and re-allocation of existing funds has occurred in virtually all land grant schools across the country to develop these types of programs. The primary goal of IRM is not to benefit veterinarians. It is to benefit producers, and IRM will continue with or without our participation because it is the most exciting new idea in the extension of information and technology in the last 50 years. Our veterinary profession needs to become much more involved in IRM and take our rightful place as a key member of any management program. If we insist on going it alone, without any cooperation with other members of the allied industries, we may some day find ourselves on the outside looking in.

**We don't need to sell the IRM concept to the livestock producer. The benefits of this type of system are obvious. He is not required to listen to each independent "sales pitch" from all of the people he normally deals with and come up with an integrated management plan by himself. This group of experts get together with him and designs a specific program for his particular operation. We have to sell the IRM concept to the rest of us in the allied industries.**

Why should a practicing veterinarian become involved in IRM? I feel that for me the most important reason is to increase my practice income. On occasion, I have heard a gasp go through groups of university people when I make the statement. All allied groups work with the producer for the same reason that he is in business, to make money. Some groups are paid directly by the producer. These include veterinarians, feed and drug salesmen, various cattle associations, bankers, and accountants. And a few groups are paid indirectly. If a client doesn't pay me, I may be stuck with the bill. But if that same client doesn't pay the county agent, the government arrests him for tax evasion. The point is that neither of us works for free. Cattlemen's associations collect dues, bankers collect interest, and so on. The only way that we can make money is for the producer to make more money first. IRM is not a government handout program. The return on investment in veterinary services is well documented, and we don't need to apologize for our interest in making a living. If the producer has to be given all of the services and materials free and/or

be paid for his cooperation, he probably won't continue any new technology when the actual program ends. I don't particularly want to work with this type of operator.

Why do we need something as cumbersome as a structured, bureaucratic, university involved program to get going on this idea? Let's just gather the people together and get started by ourselves. I agree that this is the way the management program should operate. IRM will be truly successful when we do not need the "official" programs. Each successful producer will have his own management team of experts working with him. Unfortunately, we seem to be a long way from that goal with the average cow/calf producer and the average cow/calf veterinarian. There are several benefits that IRM can offer to me until these changes occur. I am not very good at working with other allied industry people outside of veterinary medicine. I tend to think that the client is mine, and no one else has a right to talk to him. Besides, everyone else seems to want to be the veterinarian instead of me. IRM offers a framework for us work to in without stepping on each other's toes. Everyone knows before the program starts exactly what they are going to do, and where the other members' responsibilities begin. It gives us practice at working with other people to solve management problems. As we get better at being management consultants, we won't need this structured environment.

Another benefit of IRM is the tremendous amount of publicity that these programs can generate. University extension systems are specialists in extending information, and the more the producer knows about the technology and management techniques, the more likely he will be to adopt them. When this diversified group of allied industry people recommend my veterinary services as an important part of the overall management plan, I benefit greatly from this "third-party advertising". I maintain control over the veterinary aspects of the local programs, and play a key role in the overall management team. IRM is one of the most exciting food animal veterinary marketing tools I know of. It complements and expands on the AVMA's marketing plan to increase producer use of my services.

**In summary, IRM programs offer me the chance to work with other experts in developing integrated management programs for my clients. As livestock production becomes more intensive, the cow/calf producer will need to become more sophisticated in his management plans and will demand much more from the allied industry people he deals with. We need to be in the driver's seat when these changes occur.**