

Ross Mosteller
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

Recordkeeping Considerations

Starting a news column with the word “recordkeeping” might mean sure death to desire for anyone to read on, as many people don’t enjoy the records side of livestock production. It is however the beginning of many producers’ favorite time of the year - calving season, and a good time to think about records. I’ll openly recognize that not everyone enjoys data, spreadsheets and recordkeeping as much as I do, but as the old saying goes “you can’t manage what you don’t measure”.

This time of the year when Extension Offices get the request for IRM “Redbooks,” but is there a better way to keep records instead of a pocket calving book? There are various software packages available with different formats, functions and availability. These come in a variety of price ranges, some even offered free. While a physical book to keep records is convenient and useful there are benefits to digitizing records. One of the big advantages is to examine and evaluate observed trends and better understand changing aspects of the herd, side by side, over time.

It is not bad practice to use physical records that are recorded in the field and then enter the data into a computer later. This allows there to be two locations where this data is stored and can serve as a backup if something were to happen to the book or the software. Mobile device software platforms and apps are becoming more commonplace, utilized as the sole recordkeeping tool. One such app offered by Kansas State University is called CalfDex. CalfDex is a free cross-platform mobile app designed for easy individual animal data collection and recording in the field. Data are uploaded to the web and made available in easy-to-use formats by the producer/rancher. <https://calfdexapi.azurewebsites.net/>

There are several benefits to keeping records digitally. The first of which is tracking records year-over-year and identifying if management actions align with observed data points. Access to data for those with login capabilities is a second benefit, eliminating the need to find the sole calving book and reading the information within. The third major benefit is that calving books can easily be lost, often buried on the dash of pickups and have a way of disappearing or becoming illegible.

A major consideration when looking at software is the cost and usability. The cost structure is typically a straightforward answer with some fixed and/or variable cost. The variable cost is most often associated with herd size. Many companies offer free demonstrations of their product, which might be a good option to consider before purchasing software. Don’t forget about tools available through breed associations and other organizations that might be offered to those with membership as well.

There are differences between programs in ease of use. Just because two programs have similar specifications does not mean equal satisfaction. Everyone has personal preferences, choose a program that aligns with those preferences. Ask yourself; does the program have clear, consistent screens? Is it easy to enter data? Is editing data and correcting mistakes easy and logical? What do help features look like and when are they available? Does the program outline make sense? A program that does not make sense to the user can be extremely frustrating to use and may lead to lack of implementation.

The big question with applying any technology on an operation is “does this make sense on my operation?” It is important to remember that, while you may use software, that doesn’t mean it should be the only format for keeping this data. There should also be considerations on cybersecurity protocols to keep this data private. Furthermore, this technology depends upon the user learning how to use it and committing to keeping records in a digital format.

If after reading this digital recordkeeping still doesn’t seem to be a fit, contact your local Extension office to request a “Redbook” or [K-State Cow/Calf Record Book MF185](#) which is also available via the KSRE online bookstore. May your calves all be born without assistance and data recorded to remember that they were!