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Weaning Time Data Collection

Two recent conversations have reemphasized the reason why data collection is important. Breed associations need more of it for databases and bull buyers appreciate it! We are in that time of year where spring calving cow herds are weaned, and this serves as a good checkpoint for data collection. I fully realize that not everyone has a scale, but many data points can be made through visual observation, transferred to paper by pen.

Comprehensive management decisions used to improve genetics, management practices and profit potential of cow-calf operations should be based on data. Periodically, it is important to step back and evaluate the production system. Weaning time is the best time of year to measure, quantify and document herd performance. This is typically the one time in the year when all animals are caught and under close evaluation. Not only is weaning time a great time to vaccinate and weigh calves, but is also the opportunity to preg check, evaluate and weigh the cowherd. Herd health practices like deworming and vaccinating can be performed as well.

Weaning day can yield a wealth of information which can be evaluated to direct management decisions. A few pieces of information to consider collecting include: pregnancy status of the cows, weight and body condition of cows, weight of calves, evaluation of – udder, eyes, feet/legs and docility scoring, and evaluation of teeth in older cows has value. This is another good point in time to gauge the general health and condition of animals, check for internal and/or external parasites and apply treatments if warranted.

So how does one use this information? Since the cow is the production machine in the beef production system, maximum output needs to be produced for the system to be the most efficient. This can be measured in weaned pounds of calf, percent body weight weaned, pregnancy rates, etc... The cow herd requires input expenses and there is opportunity cost on the dollars tied up in cow inventory. The only opportunity to operate at a profit is when the production factory yields a weaned calf of greater value than the annual cost of owning and operating the production factory. The data collected can inform you about the efficiency of the production factory.

Production records like the percentage of breeding females exposed that raised a calf to weaning, the percentage of calves born that survived to weaning and the percentage of our cow's mature weight that they are weaning off are some important benchmarks of cow productivity. These serve to determine efficiency and can be used to improve management and selection decisions that will result in more profitability. These benchmarks of productivity can be calculated from the data captured at weaning, so take advantage of the opportunity to collect and use data.

Kansas State University Animal Science has an Excel spreadsheet that can be used to calculate these Standard Performance Analysis (SPA) numbers. It can be found at: <https://www.asi.k-state.edu/extension/beef/files/SPAproductionBlank2014.xlsx>