



*ID, records don't
have to be high tech*

By Miranda Reiman

Climbing into a tractor cab at a farm sale, you discover corn yield counts for the past 20 years. The crop rotations on the back 80, the river bottom and “John’s place” are laid out in barely legible layers on the vinyl interior. To an outsider, this “chicken scratch” is useless information, but to the farmer who owned that tractor, it was priceless. He might have used it to pick different seed varieties or to change his weed and pest control from year to year.

What about the rancher who gets a new pair of gloves every calving season so he has a new place record each calf’s birth date? After a 2 a.m. calving check reveals a baby on the ground, he writes about it on his glove. In the morning, that impromptu notepad still provides individual identification (ID).

In today’s world of lightening-fast technology and computerized gadgets of every sort, some would have you believe that the only way to keep records is by computerized spreadsheets, electronic ear tags and chute-side scanners. Maybe you think someday you’ll learn about all of those thingamajigs and start keeping records.

You don’t have to wait for someday to start keeping detailed records on each and every head. Delaying your record keeping until you’ve learned every inch of a new technology might take years. Perhaps the mere thought of working all the kinks out keeps you from even trying individual ID. Some producers find that computers and digital files make them more efficient and organized, but if that’s not your knack, don’t let the lack of computer deter you.

It doesn’t matter if you keep it by cow number or cow name; the important part is keeping those records. When you get back to the house, transfer that information from hatband, glove or hand into a more permanent form of documentation. You can get spreadsheets from Extension Web sites, use an accounting record book or make your own columns and rows with a ruler and

pencil. You can develop a category for everything you want to track, from cow and sire numbers to calving ease and weaning weight.

Then you have a wealth of information to analyze and learn from. That notebook in your shirt pocket may be the ticket for keeping track of any details. But if you never open it again, there's not much point in entering the details in the first place. As a cattleman, you're also an animal scientist. Your herd data could just provide the next big breakthrough on your operation. Let the records help you hone management strategies or genetic decisions.

Comparing years of information to each other can provide you a clear picture of the effects your changes have actually made. Perhaps the records will reveal a trend towards increasing birth weights. A few extra pounds each year didn't seem like much, but seeing a 5% increase in calving interval could become a problem in no time. Perhaps you'll be able to trace longevity and efficiency back to heifers retained out of one or two cow families. The list of discoveries could go on and on.

Connecting this type of data to carcass information can give you an even better idea of where your herd's headed, and let you take the wheel. Whether you're retaining ownership or cooperating with a feedlot or cattle buyer, tracing harvest information back to the dam and sire is one of the most important steps you can take to add value. You can identify the calves that will make you the most money and then produce more of them.

Keeping detailed, individualized records can provide a great return on investment in the long run. If you use that information, payout is the same regardless of whether the data storage is in a hard drive in your office or those old boot boxes in the basement—whichever is easiest for you to use.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Steve Suther will consider whether it pays to chase loaded words. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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