

Black Ink : Records That Work

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Whatever activity you think of, there's probably a world record. Somebody has licked the most envelopes in a minute, played the longest chess match and worn the most t-shirts at one time.

There are books, websites and even news articles that tell of oddities and obscurities that make the list of being the most, longest, heaviest, smallest or fastest.

Many of you are probably thinking, "But who cares?"

Good point. Eating the most cockroaches ever earned Ken Edwards a spot in the "Guinness World Records" book, but he isn't exactly a household celebrity. So, if nobody cares about records, what are they worth?

The question can be applied to your cattle operation and its unique set of records. Many educators and industry experts say to keep detailed information, but one recently added an obvious but critical qualifier: "You should only keep records that you're actually going to use."

When your tracking system becomes so complicated that it's keeping you from using it effectively, it's time for an overhaul.

First, you can evaluate what data is easy to gather and record. A pocket-sized book is a simple tool for recording calving dates and identification (ID) from your pasture or pickup. Writing specific vaccinations on the calendar date given might be the best processing map you could keep. Others find value in high-tech systems, in a spreadsheet or commercial herd-management computer program. Either way, you still need to collect the information without a lot of extra labor.

Next, ask yourself what questions you want to know the answers to from year to year. Pregnancy rates and abortions can help you identify breeding problems and reproductive diseases. Weaning weights can give you feedback on both

your selection and early nutrition programs.

On-farm research can provide tell you what works and what doesn't, just based on your observation. From one calf crop to the next, these notes are of some value, but data speaks for itself. It doesn't require a photographic memory or keen intuition for picking up subtle differences. If something happens gradually over the years, you might not notice a problem cropping up unless you have the records to prove it.

Now, for all those books you never open. Why go to the work of gathering and writing down data if it's never going to be used? You may go back and analyze a five-year trend, some day. But if that day never comes, those records are about as good as the honor for the longest fingernails in the world. (Yes, totaling almost 25 feet, this is a Utah woman's claim to fame.)

Maybe your system is getting a little more lax every year because you just don't have time. You need to analyze and prioritize. List those details could help guide your management decisions and record the numbers, gather the measurements. Streamline the process, and then use the records. You're more likely to put precious effort and energy into taking notes if you're confident you can use them to add value.

That's an underlying goal, after all, and the payoff is both immediate and long-term. Don't waste another day's feed on your worst cow. Take advantage of natural premiums or source- and age-verification programs to get paid for what, in many cases, you're already doing. It just takes proper documentation.

The next time you hear somebody going on about the oldest performing ballerina or the greatest distance walked with a milk bottle balanced on the head, you might not call it silly. After all, the value of a record is all in the eye of the beholder. The records you keep on your farm or ranch only need to make sense to you, just so they provide answers that make dollars and cents. Δ

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