Determining record keeping priorities

K-State beef cattle experts advocate for data as a valuable decision-making tool

MANHATTAN, Kan. — Humans consume data daily, from knowing the latest COVID-19 counts to learning which baseball pitcher threw the most strikeouts from the mound. In sports, that data can determine which player gets called up to play.

Likewise, data can also help beef producers decide which cows to keep or cull.

Knowing what is the most important data to collect can sometimes be hard to determine, but the experts at the Kansas State University Beef Cattle Institute offered some advice on how to set those priorities on a recent Cattle Chat podcast. Joining veterinarians Bob Larson and Brad White was agricultural economist Dustin Pendell and a special guest, Phillip Lancaster, a beef cattle nutritionist with BCI.

“A good record keeping system is more than just assigning identification to an animal; it is gathering information and then using it to make decisions about the herd,” White said.

Depending on the marketing goals of the operation, the type of data collected will vary, but the experts agreed on one key statistic for all cow-calf herds.

“The most important metric to collect for any cow-calf operation is the number of calves weaned, or even better, the number of pounds of calves weaned per the number of cows exposed to a bull,” Larson said.

He noted that the pounds of calves weaned gives producers a rough estimate of income potential, while the number of cows exposed allows cattle ranchers to calculate an expense estimate.

Along with tracking breeding success, Lancaster said an effective record keeping system must allow producers to monitor the herd inventory.
“Producers need to know which cows were brought into the herd at what time and how many cows left the herd by being sold,” Lancaster said.

Pendell said there are times in the production cycle when it is easy to collect data, such as at weaning and when the herd is given vaccinations. He said the amount of data collected on purebred operations may need to be more than on a typical commercial herd.

“The data collected can then be shared with the person who buys them and that may influence the perceived value of the animal,” Pendell said. “There are a lot of marketing opportunities for animals that are individually identified.”

White agreed with the added value of individual data tracking but said for other herds, managing the data as a group may suffice.

“A record keeping system doesn’t have to be complex. It just needs to match the needs of the herd,” he said.

To hear the full discussion about record keeping and advice on rotational grazing and introducing grain into a grass-based diet, listen to the BCI Cattle Chat podcast online.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Beef Cattle Institute podcast, https://ksubci.org/media/podcast-2

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