

Records, Records, Records

Records – they are the bane of our existence! We keep them for tax purposes, inventories, breeding, healthand even food safety. Some days all it feels like is a never ending multitude of boxes waiting to be filled! Arrgggg! But – wait! They can and are incredibly useful AND can even make or save us money.

Records can give us powerful insights into the past and as well as into the future. Records are great reminders of events, they help us see how things are working (or not) and are excellent tools for decision making. By applying records to things like animal treatments, pesticide applications, rations or even manure applications, you can really see the effect of your efforts and make decisions that can influence your success.

Should keeping records be hard – no! Can they be useful – yes! Here are some basic tips of what a good record looks like:

- ☑ **Keep it simple** – Don't get caught up in pages and pages of various types of records. If you can simplify records by combining common themes (e.g. processing or treatments), tasks (e.g. calving) and/or locations then do so. You'll find they make much more sense and are more likely to be used by everyone. A useful record is a well thumbed record!
- ☑ **Make them accessible** – A record kept in the house may be of no use if the task is being done out in the barn or if the persons doing the task don't have access to it. Not only will this decrease their use, but the information entered at a later date may not be accurate or even complete. If this happens, valuable information is lost!
- ☑ **Be consistent** – Sometimes it's just not possible or practical to keep the master record out in the barn. If that's the case make sure your temporary record matches your master record format i.e. it contains all the same data collection points as the master record. This way valuable information isn't assumed or forgotten, creating inaccuracies later.
- ☑ **Make them legible** – Encourage everyone filling them out to print clearly so the information can be retrieved later by anyone. To encourage read-ability, where possible, adjust the design and format to make the boxes bigger – you may sacrifice a page or two but the quality of information collected will make up for the added space used.
- ☑ **Be accurate** – Having the right information is crucial – especially if you're trying to make quick decisions and can't take the time to verify the information. A prime example is an animal whose leg is broken and you're trying to decide if you can cut your losses by slaughtering earlier. If withdrawal calculations are incorrect due to inaccurate information you could inadvertently send an animal to slaughter that could make someone very sick.

Most programs, for example the Verified Beef Production™ program, are looking for very specific bits of information (e.g. animal I.D., treatment date, product, dosage, route and withdrawal time) to answer very specific questions (e.g. has the withdrawal time passed). Expanding a record to include other information pertinent to you only makes sense and can add to the benefit and purpose of the record. For example: during calving time adding to treatment records such things as: reason for treatment, dam I.D., calving ease, sex of the calf, weather conditions, if calving was assisted, etc, etc, can provide you with so much more – especially when making culling or other management decisions later. Making an effective record will not only add value to your operation it will also help you save money as records can help you:

- ☑ Catch costly mistakes early;
- ☑ Monitor task effectiveness;
- ☑ Calculate productivity as well as expenses;
- ☑ Keep track of events so nothing is forgotten; and,
- ☑ Provide proof of tasks being completed.

The format you choose to collect the data in will depend on the type of information you want to collect. Records can be used to collect very simple straight forward data like product names, amounts, and treatment dates, to collecting more descriptive comment oriented information. Both are very useful but different when it comes time to analyse later and depending upon how you collect it will impact the overall effectiveness of the record. For example:

- ☑ **Tables** – Tables are very useful for non-descriptive data such as application dates, yes/no answers to a specific question (e.g. broken needle present?), temperatures, volumes, frequencies of applications, etc. This type of information can be easily summarized and often tabulated to show trends i.e. frequency of occurrence or if a benchmark has been reached (e.g. withdrawal time is passed). Running your eye down a collection of pages of tables can quickly show for example if a treatment protocol is successful over a wide variety of situations. With some quick calculations you can even determine percentages of success versus failures. Combine this with knowledge of other variables like weather conditions, housing, and/or breed/family lines and some very key management decisions can be made over time.

- ☑ **Checklists** – Are great tools to confirm if a task has been done or help someone remember all the components of a task – especially if done infrequently or by a new trainee. The checklist could be quite extensive (e.g. helping you prepare for an audit) or may simply require a confirmation of the task with a space for notes of any problems or changes that may have occurred while doing the task.
- ☑ **Journals or calendars**– If not a lot of information is required journals are quite possible and can be very useful. However if you find you are writing a lot of information down in a journal it quickly becomes ineffective and can actually create problems for you. For example journals often:
 1. Lack “cues” or headings – Without reminders to write down all the information often the user will only write down what appears pertinent at the time or assume they will be easily remembered or found in other sources – regretfully this is often not the case.
 2. Difficult to pick out data when information is needed quickly. Because most journals are a broad collection of large amounts of varied information separated by a date, finding information later within the masses can be quite laborious and often very difficult. It’s like finding a remembered ad in the newspaper later – nearly impossible and always frustrating!
 3. Because information retrieval is often laborious and time consuming it’s often not done to the best it could be. Plus, if you’re on a program that requires an auditor to review your program and you pay them by the hour the time spent by the auditor to determine the efficacy of your program can be far more costly than if the review was done on a very clear and straightforward record keeping system. Time is money no matter how you look at it!
- ☑ **Computer records** – Computers can be very useful and if set up correctly with user friendly data entry sections can be very easy and quick. The only concern is access and training for all users and back-ups for when the power or computer goes down. However once these issues are dealt with by having on hand temporary records with the same data entry fields and regular printouts or back-ups, a computer can be a valuable tool for evaluating trends and comparing your results to past or industry benchmarks.

To create an effective record that works for you the type of record required will depend upon you: how many people use them, the level and type of information collected and personal preference. There are as many different types and formats of records as there are people and what works best for you may take some discovery. If you participate in a program that requires record keeping talk to your program advisor as they will have seen a large variety of formats and may be able to guide you to something that fits your needs.

Like the catch phrase says, “knowledge is power”, and records will help you make better, more powerful decisions in your business.

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