



# The Value of Beef Cattle Record Keeping

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**R**ecord keeping has value in beef production. It is a tool to document and evaluate production information, and records are a crucial component to make informed management decisions. So how well do you know your cow herd? The well-quoted statement “you cannot manage what you do not measure” from the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) Integrated Resource Management Program is quite true. Record keeping reveals a herd’s current production level, identifies inefficiencies, and provides information to make improvements. To begin, or to reevaluate, focus on the overall design. Record keeping should be designed to be practical to maintain, to be as simple to as detailed as desired, and with the overall purpose of increasing efficiency.

## **Approach to Beef Cattle Record Keeping**

Record keeping can be approached in different ways. One

option can be a whole herd approach to record cattle inventories at each phase of production, market prices and animal weights, and using that data to monitor herd performance. This whole herd approach provides a general evaluation of a herd’s production level. Standard performance analysis (SPA) measurements, initiated by NCBA, such as calculating pregnancy, calving, and weaning percentages, provide an analysis of whole-herd performance.

Another option is an individual animal approach to record specific performance data for each animal using unique animal identification. This individual animal approach provides more precise information to make genetic and management improvements. An individual animal approach involves recording specific performance data for each animal, such as identification number, birth date, calf sex, sire, dam, breed composition,

weaning weight, and more, if desired. To be effective, however, an animal identification system must first be established.

### **Application of Animal Identification**

Application of animal identification should provide a system where each animal has an identification number with no duplication. Identification numbers should be applied for easy recognition of animals for management practices. Numbering systems should be designed to be simple to be practical. Individual identification provides a structure to track specific animals to make informed selection decisions to improve herd performance and document herd health treatments. Without an animal identification system, effective management is more difficult.

Animal identification can be applied as a temporary and a permanent method. Temporary identification is any method that can be removed or lost. Temporary methods include visual ear tags, electronic ear tags (EIDs), and neck chains. Permanent identification is any method that cannot be removed or lost. Permanent methods include tattoos, hot branding, and freeze branding. A combination of both methods is recommended to be easy to read and permanent to work correctly. As ear tags can be lost, a permanent method is then needed to verify an animal's identification number.

### **Animal Identification Systems**

The two most common animal identification numbering systems are the International Year/Letter Designations for Animal Identification and a numerical calendar year system. Both systems provide a method to apply the year of birth along with the calf birth order for an identification number. The International Year/Letter Designations for Animal Identification (Refer to <https://guidelines.beefimprovement.org>) assigns a specific letter to each corresponding birth year. For example, the letter designated for 2024 is M, so the first calf born this year would be M01. This year letter system uses 22 letters from the alphabet which allows 22 years before the potential for a duplicate identification number. The numerical calendar year system, such as for 2024 with the first calf as 401, provides 10 years before duplication of identification numbers. The numerical year system should be applied with caution when retaining replacement heifers as duplicate identification numbers can occur quickly.

### **Application of Record Keeping Systems**

Production records include cattle and pasture inventories, cattle movement, animal identification, breed composition, body condition scores, breeding and calving information, birth dates, calf sex, production weights, herd health treatments, and more. Record keeping can be accomplished with a low technology or high technology method. Therefore, whether you prefer handwriting your records or using technology, there are resources available for either option.

A low technology method consists of hand-written records

utilizing notebooks or customized guides such as the NC-BA's Integrated Resource Management (IRM) Red Book. This pocket-sized annual record book contains reference information and forms to record cattle inventory, breeding and calving activity, body condition scores, herd health, and pasture usage. A high technology method utilizes internet-based or software-based specialized systems. Technology-based record systems maintain animal inventories, animal production history, calculate adjusted weights, ratios, frame scores, and average calving intervals plus tracks herd health treatments, animal movement, pasture usage, and more. Maintaining records of herd health treatments is an essential part of the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program. Herd health treatments can be maintained in both the low and high technology-based record systems to record treatment dates, medication names, lot and serial numbers, dosages, routes of administration, and vaccination and withdrawal dates.

### **Knowledge Gained from Record Keeping**

Breeding and calving records are of real value to measure a cow or heifer's reproductive performance by tracking when in designated breeding and calving seasons a calf was produced, or if a calf was produced at all. Cow performance over time can be evaluated for efficiency by reviewing a cow's average calving interval, or the average number of days from one calving date to the next. An ideal average calving interval is 370 days or less, and a higher calving interval indicates a cow is later calving or has missed a year in producing a calf. Technology based systems allow for easier management and calculation of individual production history, such as average calving interval, to evaluate specific animals more thoroughly, but the purpose remains the same. Why retain cows that do not successfully produce a calf each year?

Record keeping can also evaluate a cow or sire's production level by tracking the average of their calf weaning weights, both actual and adjusted, to indicate their level of production within the herd. Actual weaning weights for each calf are collected between the ages of 160 and 240 days. These actual weights are then adjusted to a consistent 205-day age standard and for the age of the dam. Tracking calf adjusted weaning weights of a specific cow shows her level of production within the herd. Why retain cows in the herd who are performing poorly?

In selecting replacement heifers, records can be a tremendous aid by providing individual heifer performance combined with a heifer's dam and sire production history. This paired with a heifer's visual appraisal results in improved selection to retain the best replacement heifers. Individual records also expedite specific culling of cows, heifers, and sires, and significantly aids in selecting superior herd sires. These are just a few of the many aspects of value that record keeping provides to manage a herd more efficiently. Record keeping serves as a key component to achieve an advanced level of management. So how well do you know your cow herd?

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## Key For Your Beef Operation

Record keeping is valuable in beef production as a tool to document and evaluate information. However, the value of beef cattle record keeping is not truly realized until it is fully applied. Recording information alone does not provide an advantage. The information provided by records must be evaluated to guide genetic and management decision-making. Recording information without applying it does not fully capture the value of record keeping, so be sure to make use of it!

The Alabama Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) is a resource for the application of production record keeping by providing the Alabama BCIA Commercial Record Keeping Program, which utilizes a specialized, internet-based record keeping system for hands-on application. For more information, please visit [www.albcia.com](http://www.albcia.com)



The Alabama ProStart Invitational took place March 3-4 in Orange Beach, Alabama. The Alabama Cattlemen's Association and Alabama Beef Checkoff Program offer support to this high school culinary education program by sponsoring the culinary contest and offering a Best Beef Dish award to one of the competing culinary teams. Congratulations to Gulf Shores High School for winning the 2024 Best Beef Dish award!



This article is furnished as a producer-directed goal of the Alabama State Checkoff. For more information on how beef checkoff dollars are working for you, contact the Alabama Cattlemen's Association at 334-265-1867 or visit our website at [www.bamabeef.org](http://www.bamabeef.org).

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