

Cow Herd Performance and Profitability: Measuring How You Stack Up

Dr. Scott P. Greiner

Extension Animal Scientist, VA Tech

The arrival of April is often much anticipated, as it typically signals the start of grass season and relief from the challenges of winter. The date of April 15 takes on a special connotation thanks to the IRS, and is likely not met with the same enthusiasm for most of us. However, our annual task of gathering records and receipts to prepare tax returns also provide an opportunity to evaluate more closely our cow-calf enterprises. There is no time like the present to initiate a close examination of the performance and profitability of our operations. The information necessary to do so is largely at hand as we prepare a Schedule F, and with some minor adaptations some very useful measures can be compiled to enhance our business and animal management decisions.

Profitability of the cow-calf enterprise within any particular year is impacted by several factors. An analysis of the most basic farm records can quantify important issues affecting herd success such as reproductive performance, calf growth and weaning weight, calf health performance, market price, and herd turnover. An annual analysis of various herd performance measures can serve as a benchmark against past and future years' performance.

Many tools are available to assist with this task. One very simple tool is the Virginia Cow Herd Performance Check-Up (available on the Virginia Cooperative Extension web site <http://www.ext.vt.edu/> or at your local extension office). Using commonly available herd records, a Performance Check-Up can be completed. Basic sources of information needed to complete the analysis include: cow inventory records, calving records, and animal sale receipts.

The Virginia Cow Herd Performance Check-Up will generate many pieces of valuable information on key cow herd performance measures. Seven key measures provide the essential information for evaluation of the cow herd and decision support for changes in management.

Herd calving percent - Herd calving percent is perhaps the single most important measure of the cow herd's reproductive efficiency. A realistic goal for herd calving percent should be in the 90-94% range.

Percent calf death loss - Once calves have been born and are at least a day old, less than 1% death loss until weaning should be expected.

Percent calf crop weaned per cow exposed - This calculation is the best measure of a herd's overall reproductive and health status. A goal of 89-93% calf crop weaned per cow exposed should be attainable for many herds. Obtaining such herd performance will require attention to those factors which impact reproductive performance and calf health.

Length of calving season for mature cows in days - A restricted calving season of 60-70 days offers many benefits. With a short calving season, the manager can focus attention to the cow herd during this critical time. A shortened calving season enables the producer to more efficiently match the herd feeding program to meet the changing

nutritional needs of the cow herd. Uniformity of the calf crop at marketing is also enhanced by a short calving season also.

Average calf weaning weight - The average weight of calves at weaning can be impacted by several factors including age of the calf at weaning, calving season, forage conditions, milking ability of the cow herd, genetic merit, implants, deworming management, and others. A reasonable goal for most spring calving herds would be for the calves to have an average weight per day of age of at least 2.75 pounds. This growth level would equate to an average weaning weight of 575 pounds for a seven month old calf. For most fall calving herds, a weight per day of age of 2.5 pounds or a weaning weight of 525 pounds at seven months would be a reasonable goal.

Pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed - This measure combines the relative reproductive and growth performance of a cow herd. A realistic goal for a well managed herd should be determined by multiplying "percent calf crop weaned per cow exposed" by the goal for the "average calf weaning weight." (Example: 90% x 575 pounds = 518 pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed)

The above described measures are indicators of overall herd profitability. To capture the entire picture regarding profit, these performance measures must be integrated with measures of cost of production. IRM and SPA summary data consistently reveals that large differences exist between herds in feed and operating costs. This variation in expenditures, coupled with differences in production measures (those outlined above) equate to substantial differences in break-even costs and ultimately profitability.

A logical first step in cow-calf herd analysis is to perform the simple steps and determine herd productivity using the procedures outlined above. Most cow-calf producers have the information in hand to complete this assessment. Doing so will enhance the ability to make informed management decisions which relate to profitability.

For additional information and details, contact your local agent at your Virginia Cooperative Extension Office.