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Management Benchmarks

Many times, those placed in a position of ranch management and decision making are there because of passion about what they are doing. However, you can't manage what you don't measure, and good management practices begin with good records. For a rancher, that might mean reviewing the Red Book in your pocket, spreadsheets of data points or even online record keeping apps. Whatever it is, study what was good, bad and what areas might need changing in the coming years. If you don't know where to start here are a few big items to consider.

Feed costs make up two thirds of the expenses on most ranches, when considering pasture and harvested feed. It is not only important to pay attention to the quantity of feed on hand, but maybe more importantly the quality of feed. Minimizing feed waste, reducing the cost of feed when possible and feeding to animal requirements are all important factors. Forage quality can vary from year-to-year, due to different growing and harvest conditions. The only way to truly know what is on hand is to invest in forage testing and balance rations with the feed supply on hand. Avoid overfeeding and the converse, underfeeding to optimize feed usage. Look for ways to extend the grazing season as livestock almost always harvest forage more cost effectively than fossil fueled equipment.

While it is true that feed cost is a large percentage of expense on most operations, increasing the number of live calves/lambs/kids can have a greater impact on the operation than incremental adjustments in feed costs. Often the difference in the top profitability and low profitability operations are simply the number of live animals weaned and available to market. Focus on increasing live births by altering pre-parturition health protocols, supplementing extra colostrum at birth and/or better post-parturition management. Simply maintaining more live animals from birth to weaning will generate more income and increase production efficiency. CHAPS data from North Dakota State University shows a range of 79 to 97 percent in calving percentage from lower quarter to upper three fourths of herds, with the target benchmark for operations of 93.6 percent. Sheep flocks should strive for the national average of 103 percent lambing or higher.

Pounds weaned per female exposed is a good value to track within the operations, as this number considers reproduction and maternal production. Weaning weights have not changed greatly in the last decade, even with adaptation of genetic technology. Therefore, the true measure of production efficiency needs be measured in pounds weaned per female exposed as this measure both individual animal performance and reproductive efficiency of the herd or flock. For beef producers, South Dakota State University has developed the [Reproductive Management Score Card](#), to track data used to determine how reproductive efficiency is affecting whole-herd profitability. Colorado State University has a [Standardized Performance Analysis for Sheep Producers worksheet](#) that is a good tool as well.

Being a top-level, low-cost feeder and highly efficient production manager will all be for not if marketing isn't given equal attention. It isn't a good marketing plan to show up to the sale barn and get the top of the market without doing a little homework, planning and communicating. Take the time to study the cash and futures market, consult with a marketing specialist to determine when the best time is to market. There are some very useful risk protection tools accessible to ranchers to help give stability to operational profitability and sustainability. Don't get stuck in habits and not change if your current marketing window doesn't typically overlap with better marketing windows. Don't forget about working to increase the value of every animal leaving the operation, including cull breeding stock.

There are many factors to consider and lots to manage on any livestock operation. While record keeping might not be the top priority for everyone, it is very difficult to be a good manager without it and analysis of the data kept. A good Kansas State University publication on this topic is called ["Production Records for Cow/Calf Producers" MF3298](#) found at the KSRE online bookstore.