

## **Cattle Business in Mississippi – November/December 2011 “Beef Production Strategies” article**

### **Choosing Software for Cattle Record Keeping**

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Computer and high-speed Internet use both continue to rise on Mississippi agricultural operations. According to the Mississippi Agricultural Statistics Service, as of 2011, nearly 6 out of 10 Mississippi farms had computer access and over half had Internet access. Although less than a third of Mississippi agricultural operations were using computers in their farm businesses, this statistic had increased by more than 22 percent over the same statistic just 2 years earlier. As more cattle and other agricultural producers recognize the value of computer and Internet usage for their businesses, questions follow about what software would be beneficial for their operations.

Keeping records on herd inventories, progeny histories, breeding, calving, health, performance data, input use records, expense records, sales records, and business contacts can be very valuable for producers who then use those records in making management and marketing decisions. For records to be meaningful, they must be accurate and in a usable form. Hand-written records are common on cattle operations. Electronic and handwritten records can serve as a backup to each other in case records are lost or otherwise compromised. Record keeping software facilitates electronic data recording, organization, searches, and reporting.

Record keeping software can be as simple as a custom spreadsheet. It could also incorporate commercial cattle record software. To determine the appropriate electronic record keeping tool to use, first determine the purposes of record keeping for the operation. Will the data be used for genetic improvement efforts? Will financial data need to be kept in addition to production data? Will the data be used for tax reporting purposes? How does the operation type, size, and management level influence the record keeping and reporting needs? Is there a need to manage records for multiple livestock species or to also manage crop data? Record needs may vary according to seedstock vs. commercial herds, cow-calf vs. stocker operations, small vs. large herds, and diversified vs. single-enterprise agricultural operations.

The desired report features and details are another important consideration. Who will be the end user of the data? Will entities outside the farm such as breed associations receive some of the data? What will the data be used to accomplish? Custom reporting features provide flexibility in data organization and reporting. Find out if the software product chosen integrates or interfaces with specific accounting software, breed association databases, electronic identification systems, and livestock scales. Some of these interfaces required software add-on purchases or purchases of specific software products. In addition, not every breed association and every livestock scales model is supported by software products with these types of interfaces. Check with the software companies and breed association, for example, to determine data interface compatibility. Also, determine how the software product integrates with common word processing and

spreadsheet software in terms of importing and exporting data. Ease of mass data entry is crucial for many operations.

Consider the record keeping and computer skills of any persons who will be responsible for entering or using the records. Make sure that the software chosen fits both user capabilities and needs. On-screen or printed input forms, as well as on-screen or printed summary reports, are generally available with cattle record keeping software. User manuals, online discussion forums, frequently asked question answers, newsletter, training videos, training workshops, and direct technical support can be helpful. Sometimes these services are free or included with a software package purchase, whereas some services are fee-based. Learn not only the type and cost of software support options but also any potential restrictions such as time restrictions on services.

Know the limitations of electronic technology for managing cattle operation records. Hardware and software compatibility, power outages, Internet connection disruptions, and data losses are all potential challenges. It is essential that cattle record keeping software is compatible with computer hardware and peripheral devices such as printers and monitors. Check hard drive space, random access memory, processor type and speed, and operating system for compatibility with a given software product. Do not assume compatibility just because the computer is relatively new. Some newer computers require additional downloads for proper functionality of cattle record keeping software. An Internet connection may be required to receive critical downloads, or users may have to request discs with these files. Some software products for portable devices are available that facilitate data entry while working cattle or in the field. Data can then be transferred to and from a desktop version of the same application.

Cost is a frequently cited consideration in software purchasing decisions. Commercially available beef cattle record-keeping software programs generally range from \$75 to \$695 each. Some companies provide several different software products within a brand with a tiered-pricing structure based on product features. Some advanced software features may only be available with higher tiers of a product line. However, users may be able to easily upgrade a software package within a product line for a fee.

Try it before you buy it. Free program trials are often available for cattle record keeping software. Sample data may also be included. These free trials are typically available for download and may offer full functionality of the program for a limited time frame, often 1 to 2 months. Then after the free trial expires, users have the option to purchase the program to continue use of the software. This is a good way to learn about the individual features of individual software programs and to directly compare multiple potential programs for the operation. In addition, it may be helpful to visit with others who have experience using specific software packages. They can provide critiques and use tips and sometimes even pass along referral coupons for software purchases.

The recent Beef Cattle Genetics Learn at Lunch series addressed cattle record keeping software at one of its sessions. All of these sessions are archived online at [msucares.com/livestock/beef/beefsc.html](http://msucares.com/livestock/beef/beefsc.html) for anyone who would like to watch these presentations on their own schedule. For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.