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Going from Biased to Best: Decisions on Cattle Operations

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Most cattle producers strive to make good decisions on their operations. Many seek out information, formal or informal education, and advice from trusted sources in attempts to improve decision making. However, less than optimum decisions are frequently made by cattle producers. Some simple concepts can be applied by producers in the decision-making process to result in better decision-based outcomes.

An informed decision is based on information gathered to make that decision. So, the quality of the decision depends largely upon the information used to make it. The more accurate, up-to-date, and relevant that information is to the problem at hand, the better the producer’s knowledge base from which to decide.

Gathering Accurate Information

Lengthy experience in cattle production can result in lessons learned that can be shared with others. This is often why producers visit amongst themselves to pick up tips and tricks from each other. However, lengthy experience in cattle production does not necessarily equate to expertise in all aspects of cattle production. It is common to hear producers make statements that go against the general consensus in the scientific community. In some of these cases, the producer may have observed something that is valid. In other instances, they may inadvertently bias another producer’s knowledge base with inaccurate information. So, the key is to remember that if it is not “proven”, then consider it with caution. If it sounds too good to be true, do some investigation before implementing a practice or adopting a product.

“Rural legends” are rampant in beef cattle production. These legends may sound at first as if they are accurate when actually they are not. One example is the idea of starving the birth weight out of a calf before it is born. The legend goes that if a pregnant cow or heifer is not allowed proper nutrition prior to calving, then her calf will be lighter and perhaps smaller at birth and result in less calving difficulty. To be clear, this is inaccurate and can actually lead to greater risk of calving difficulty, not to mention other problems. If this wives’ tale is believed and causes a producer to provide a pregnant cow or heifer with inadequate nutrition prior to calving, it can have detrimental effects on the strength and stamina of the dam to undergo the calving process. In addition, when considering what is now being discovered about the lifetime effects on calves of their dams’ nutrition during their gestation, the calves born to nutritionally mismanaged dams will perform well below their genetic potential for years to come. So, the bottom line here is not to believe everything said on face value. There are many “rural legends” out there that do not stand up to scrutiny. Check the facts first.

The Internet is a tremendous resource for cattle producers when it comes to information gathering. As with other sources, information found on the Internet must be evaluated for

accuracy, timeliness, and relevance to be of benefit in decision making. Determine the source, review other references, and ask questions of reliable expert sources to make sure the information being considered is appropriate for use in decisions for a specific cattle operation. Some opinions are posted online as if they were facts. Discern the difference, and do not propagate the myths.

Collecting Timely Information

Some recommendations that were solid at one point in time might now be outdated and counterproductive. Here are a few examples. New forage varieties may now be available that outperform older ones that were once considered to be the best options. Products that were once legal to use might now be restricted or not allowed at all. Expected progeny differences printed on a registration certificate or catalog may not be the most current version available. Website and publications can become dated rather quickly.

Make sure that information being used is up-to-date. Even if a recurring decision is being evaluated, search for updated information each time the decision is made. If the decision-making process is prolonged, then continue to gather information up until the decision is finalized. However, do not overanalyze information to the point that it delays a decision and negatively affects the cattle operation.

Finding Relevant Information

Producers often ask about the ideal calving season or perfect bull for a herd, but this depends on many factors. The “best” answer may differ from one operation to the next. Cattle production decisions should be based on site-specific conditions. Just because something works or does not work on one farm does not mean that it will work the same on another farm.

It is logical that regional differences necessitate different beef cattle production systems and the decisions that go into operating those systems. Rainfall patterns, environmental temperatures, soil types, input availability and price levels, proximity to cattle harvest facilities, and many other factors differ, sometimes largely, among locations. Yet even operations in close proximity to one another may need to make different decisions based on their own operational circumstances. So, knowing that the relevance of information varies by operation, make sure that information used fits the individual operation and its goals.

Decision making at its best is an involved process that uses good information to produce optimum results. It is a learning process. When cattle producers look to learn from past decisions, a less than ideal decision from the past may prompt changes that result in better decisions from that point forward. No matter what your age, experiences, or education, never stop learning. For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service or visit msucare.com/livestock/beef.