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# MEASURING - AND IMPROVING - BEEF CATTLE EFFICIENCY ON THE FARM

What is good enough today for your beef cattle farm may not be good enough in the future for a sustainable and profitable beef cattle farming operation. Considering all the challenges in the beef industry, it is important for cattle producers to have a goal that will improve the efficiency and profitability of their farm in the long term.

Efficiency is a term used to describe the production of a product in a manner that involves the least amount of waste. On a beef cattle farm, waste might entail wasting natural resources, financial resources, labour, and time.

### WHAT DO WE MEASURE?

We can't manage what we don't know. Beef cattle producers must measure both inputs and outputs of the different resources involved in a beef production operation to be more efficient. It is important to implement a thorough, reliable system that can identify and track animal performance. Beef production efficiency can be expressed as kilograms of weaned calf per cows exposed to bulls or kilograms of calf weaned per hectare.

### GOAL SETTING

Why are you farming with beef cattle? This is the first question that will help you to determine your farm's goals. Goals identify where you want the farming operation to be in five, 10, or 15 years. Long-term goal setting is important because it defines the path towards success. Farm goals should be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timeline-bound) and they must be carefully developed and prioritised. Successful farming is making the right choices based on careful planning aimed at achieving farm goals. Goal setting should involve everyone actively involved in the business.

### VELD MANAGEMENT

Veld management can help monitor changes in the veld due to grazing pressure and weather conditions. Veld management practices should be aimed at the long-term improvements in veld condition that can lead to higher grazing capacity and improved animal production. The veld management system should combine rest and grazing periods, and incorporate the

principles and goals of the veld and livestock management.

#### DAMAGING VELD PRACTICES INCLUDE:

- ▶ overstocking;
- ▶ continuous grazing;
- ▶ extended grazing periods;
- ▶ grazing the same camps at the same time every year;
- ▶ grazing by breeds and/or game species that are not adapted to the veld type; and
- ▶ injudicious lick supplementation.

### SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING

Animals have a daily nutrient requirement that varies between animals depending on their age, weight, stage of production, rate of growth, environmental factors, breed, gender, and a number of other factors.

The objective of a supplementary feeding programme is to correct for the deficiencies and/or imbalances in the veld nutrients and minerals that are available to the animals. Proper supplementation helps improve herd performance and efficiency.

Least-cost supplemental feeding generally involves grouping animals based on their nutritional requirements. To minimise the cost of feed, cattle with different nutritional requirements should be grouped separately and supplemented accordingly. Co-mingling cattle with different requirements can cause either overfeeding and wastage of costly supplements, or underfeeding and poor cattle performance.

### CONTROLLED BREEDING SEASON

Managing the cow herd to calve within a 90-day window can be one of the most important steps towards increasing efficiency and profitability. The breeding season for replacement heifers should begin one month before the breeding season for the mature cow herd. Exposing replacement heifers

to a bull one month before the cow herd breeding season allows an extra month for the heifers to recover from calving before the second breeding season begins.

#### ADVANTAGES OF A CONTROLLED BREEDING SEASON INCLUDE:

- ▶ marketing a more uniform calf crop;
- ▶ optimising the supplementary feeding programme;
- ▶ reducing the number of times necessary to gather cattle for vaccination and weaning; and
- ▶ allowing the use of cow herd performance records to select replacement heifers and identify cull cows.



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### COW HERD PERFORMANCE TESTING

The cow herd performance testing programme is designed to record information on economically important traits. These traits can be grouped into three main categories: reproduction, growth rate, and composition. Cow herd performance testing will benefit the cattle operation if the records are used for directing the herd breeding programme. It is the best tool available for selecting high-performing, high-quality replacement heifers and for identifying and culling cows with low-performing and low-quality calves. Top replacement heifers will improve the herd's ability to wean more kilograms, more efficiently.

### PRODUCTION CALENDARS

Developing a production calendar involves spending the first year keeping track of major farm activities. During the first year, producers must record all activities on the farm month by month, including breeding and calving seasons, weaning dates, vaccinations, and supplementary feeding. Once one year of activities is outlined and reviewed, a production calendar for the upcoming year can be developed. Consider developing a production calendar with the help of a veterinarian and nutritionist. A well-planned production calendar will improve the efficiency of the farm.

### PROPER, PRIOR PREPARATION PREVENTS POOR PRODUCTION PERFORMANCE.

### ENTERPRISE BUDGETS

To stay ahead in today's beef industry, one must develop business skills and closely monitor the financial aspects of beef production. A budget can help determine the cost-effectiveness of the decisions that are made on the farm. The budget tells the truth about the operation. Each enterprise on the farm (cow-calf, replacement heifers, backgrounding animals) needs its own budget; this will help determine which enterprise is most profitable and why others aren't as profitable.

### CONCLUSION

The first step towards running a more efficient operation is making sound business decisions. Implementing these common management practices will improve the overall efficiency and profitability of a beef cattle operation. Every situation is different, and what works for one person may not work for others. Remember, proper, prior preparation prevents poor production performance. <sup>®</sup>