Beef Herd Production Testing

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What is production testing?
Production testing is a simple method of obtaining systematic records for selecting and breeding more productive beef cattle. The records can be used to put beef production on a businesslike basis with a minimum of cost and effort.

Who can use production testing?
Both commercial and purebred producers who wish to improve their herds.

Why do production testing?
Production testing will help the cattlemen improve the conformation and increase the weight of his weaners more rapidly. It will identify the poor producers and make it possible to increase the pounds of calf produced per cow by eliminating poor producers.

What must be done to test a cow herd?
To test a cow herd, a cattleman should (1) see his county agent for information and forms; (2) identify each cow and her calf; (3) record birth dates of calves; (4) weigh and grade the calves at weaning time; and (5) keep a record sheet on each cow in the herd.

What is the best way to identify cows and calves?
Cows: Number branding each cow with a hot iron is one of the best identification methods. Other successful methods combine the tattoo with neck chains, horn brands, or plastic ear tags.
Calves: It is best to tattoo each calf and use some type of ear tag to identify it easily in the pasture without having to catch it.

How much time does it take to test a herd?
It takes about two hours to weigh and grade one hundred calves—depending on the handling facilities. It will take another two to three hours to work out the data.

What is the charge for this service?
There is no charge for this self help program.

How can I get scales to weigh my calves?
Several county beef cattle associations have bought portable scales to be used in this program. Individual animal scales are not expensive. See your county Extension agent.

Are there production or management practices that must be carried out?
There are no production or management requirements. Since each farm is different, this program is flexible. It provides information for your use on your own ranch. It is not intended to be used to compare records of other ranches.

I do not like the way my cows look; should I wait to put my herd on test until I cull them?
Do not wait; put your herd on test and use records to help cull poor producing cows. Do not cull cows on looks alone; hard-looking cows often produce the best calves.

How can I use these records?
Production testing records can be used to:
- Check on and improve percent calf crop.
- Cull poor producing cows.
- Select the best heifers for replacements.
- Measure the productivity of each bull.
- Increase weaning weights of calves produced.
- Improve the grade of calves produced.
- Check on and improve herd management.
- Supplement bull testing information.
- Provide additional information for buyers.
- Increase total income and efficiency of herd.

How long must I wait to get results?
After cows have been on test one year, a rancher can cull the ones that are producing lightweight, unprofitable calves. Cows failing to produce heavy weaning, high grade calves should be replaced as soon as possible. The producer may cull as many cows as he deems advisable.
What is the replacement heifer selection program?

Heifer calves are weighed, identified, and graded at weaning. Weights are adjusted to either 205 or 300 days of age by use of a chart. They are weighed and graded again at 18 to 20 months of age. Poor-gaining, low-grading heifers can be culled. By saving high-gaining heifers, herd improvement can be more rapid. Fifty percent more weaner heifers should be kept than are needed to go into the cow herd. This gives a greater opportunity to cull undesirable heifers as yearlings or as two-year-olds.

How will the cow herd record program supplement a bull testing program?

If you have your own cow herd on test, you have a great deal of information to help you select the best bull calves for further testing, including carcass information on sire progeny.

If I increase weaning weights, will quality go down?

No. Improvement in quality and increased weight can go hand in hand.

How fast can weaning weight and grade be increased?

Improvement depends on how much culling and selection you do. In one state, the average weaning weight increased 100 pounds and average grade increased from Good to Choice in herds on test for 10 years. Some producers report a gain of 50 pounds in 3 years in Oregon.

How much does weaning weight vary in most herds?

In nearly every herd on test the top one-third of the calves outweigh the bottom one-third by 100 pounds or more. In some herds, the top two-thirds of the cows make all the profit.

Does the bull have much to do with weaning weights?

A bull may increase weaning weights as much as 60 pounds. Each year such a bull earns about $400 more than an average bull. Your bulls are half your herd, so try to get good ones!

Can these records be used to compare two herds?

No. Accurate comparisons cannot be made between farms since environmental conditions vary so much. Records are most valuable to measure weight and quality differences within a herd.

Are performance testing programs always successful?

No, because records MUST be used as a guide when you cull your calves, cows, and bulls. Many producers fail to make maximum use of the performance information collected.

See your County Extension Agent for information on production testing.