Keeping effective records – what should we be doing?

Every farm has records but do you ever stop to ask pertinent questions, such as Why? How? When? and Where?, about the records you keep? This article will help you look at your records in a different light!

There is a real cost to the production of records in terms of staff and management time and so you should always satisfy yourself that you are getting a realistic return on the investment that goes into the production of your records.

Benchmarking processes

This return comes from keeping a track on stocks (theft prevention) and benchmarking processes so you know what is happening so that you can then assess if improvements are possible and, if they are, showing that your actions have worked.

We should also remember that the 80:20 rule that applies to so many facets of our business certainly applies to the recording system, in that 80% of the useful information comes from just 20% of the records we keep.

For this reason it is prudent not to just keep adding new requirements to our recording system, but to also review those records which have served their purpose and are no longer worthwhile keeping.

One approach is to say that we will only record, say, 10, 15 or 20 parameters and if we need to record a new parameter we will substitute it for one of the existing parameters that we record.

This will make you regularly evaluate all your records and ensure that they satisfy the current demands that you place on the recording system.

You should never let your recording system evolve into an unproductive and unmanageable monster!

Basically, any recording system has three goals. Firstly, it needs to keep accurate tags on what is entering the operation. Secondly, it needs to accurately tell you what is leaving the operation and, thirdly, it needs to provide you with ways of evaluating the efficiency by which these inputs are converted into these outputs.

In doing this last function the system needs to measure losses from the conversion process so that these can hopefully be reduced. Such losses would include mortality, egg breakages, water leaks and infertile breeder eggs etc.

When designing our recording system it is important to record things which our staff can easily see or measure. For example, it is not very easy to count the birds in a shed every day, but it is easy to collect the dead and culls and to count these and to then deduct this figure from the number of live birds in the shed yesterday to get the number of live birds today.

However, this system of 'totalling by deduction' has two drawbacks. Firstly, it assumes the number of birds placed at the outset was correct (this is not necessarily always the case) and, secondly, any loss (theft) of live birds will not be detected until the final reconciliation of birds at processing.

The previous example highlights an issue that is always with us with records and that is the trade off between accuracy and the resources utilised to generate the record.

As managers we need to accurately define which records we require and how they will be obtained.

In addition, we need to define how those records will be recorded and how they will be utilised to further improve the business. This last point is very important – there is no point producing records if they can not be used to improve the business!

We need to check that these goals are being achieved by regularly auditing the system. These audits should include everything detailed in Table 1.

Meaningful comparisons

In situations where records are to be used for temporal comparative purposes we must design our recording system so meaningful comparisons can occur. For this reason, it is better to trend analyse biological efficiencies on the farm rather than cost effectiveness. This is because cost effectiveness is largely price dependant and price is outside the farm's control.

This does not mean that cost effectiveness is not important and should not be measured, but that this is an exercise for elsewhere in the organisation, for example in the finance office, and not on the farm.

At farm level we will develop KPIs (key performance indicators) that are relevant to the particular farm's goals. KPIs usually focus on the utilisation of major inputs and the best known KPI for farms is FCR (food conversion ratio).

Other KPIs can be designed as appropriate, for example, energy used per 10,000

Table 1. Requirements for an effective audit.

- Confirm that everything that should be monitored is being monitored.
- Confirm that it is being correctly monitored or measured.
- If an instrument is being used the audit should confirm that that instrument is reading true and that this is regularly being confirmed and documented.
- Confirm that the people doing the measuring and recording have been properly trained in the task and are doing it competently.
- Confirm that information derived from the recording system is being accurately recorded and initialled by the person who records it.
- Confirm that those doing the recording appreciate the limits of acceptability on the data that is being recorded and that they identify all variances outside the range of acceptability.
- Where a variance has occurred the audit should confirm that corrective action(s) were implemented and the success or otherwise of these.
- Where secondary data is being recorded the audit should confirm that the calculations are being correctly undertaken.
- Where records are being used for trend analysis, for example, by producing graphs, the audit should confirm that these are correct and up to date.
- Where there is a requirement to report any unacceptable findings to senior management the audit should confirm that this process works effectively and promptly all the time.

broilers processed or labour hours per 10,000 broilers processed from the broiler farm. However, with such KPIs as the last two serious thought should be given to how we want to use them.

Be careful of using them as a big stick to continuously reduce costs with because in both these examples if we do this we are likely to do it at the expense of other key facets of production, such as quality and staff motivation.

It is much better to define a 'target zone' in which we need to be and to then ensure that this is achieved and that other goals such as the quality goals are met, or even exceeded.

With all records we must ensure that they are regularly used to ensure we are continuously improving our productivity and the quality of our products. This involves the 'improvement circle' (see Fig. 1) in which we continually compare our recorded information to the standard that we have set as our benchmark.
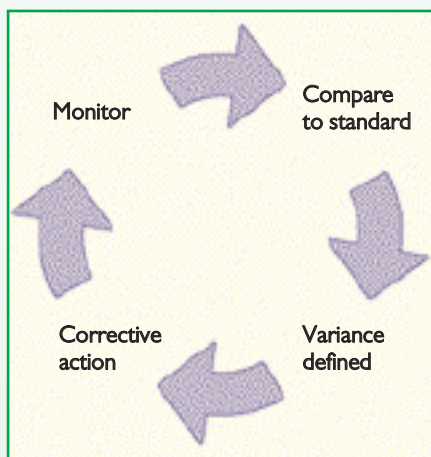
Fig. 1. The 'improvement circle'.

When we find a variance from the standard we implement corrective action to get us back on track and then keep going around the circle until we satisfy ourselves that we are back on track and our performance is where it should be.

This sounds so simple but it is amazing how many people do not do it with the result that by they time they get to the end of a crop they are well away in performance terms from where they should be and that time has run out on them in that there is no time to effect any corrective action! ■