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Identifying opportunities for improvement, benefits, and constraints of records

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Accurate sow production records are vital to a total production system as well as the individual farm. Records can be used for a multitude of purposes: data analysis, problem solving, projecting future production, conducting performance evaluations, etc. The list could go on forever as to the uses of production records, but it is generally not until a problem arises one sees the true value of accurate and easy to use production records.

In large systems, records are imperative. Most large production systems require records be turned in on a daily or weekly basis to a central system or office. These records can then be used to generate reports, run analysis and provide production staff with general information on each farm's performance. In smaller systems and individual production sites, the producer himself/herself may be responsible for gathering and compiling this information.

Since the direct value of a pig varies greatly between production systems and farms, the discussion provided in this article will focus primarily on the intrinsic value of maintaining accurate production records on the farm as well as some of the constraints of record keeping.

Over the years, systems have been developed to help manage records for sow production. PigCare™, SMS and PigChamp are just a few of the data management systems in use today in the swine industry.

Benefits

Managers, producers and veterinarians alike can find differing reasons for the use of sow production records.

Setting targets

Production records can be used to set and measure performance of both the herd itself and the employees on the farm. It is vital to set production targets from a monetary perspective. The farm has budgetary goals to meet on a weekly, monthly and yearly basis and should also have production goals as such. An overall monetary goal can translate down into individual goals. Production on a sow farm is almost completely intertwined, so it would be difficult to set a single goal without understanding the impact other production issues will have on this target. For example, a farm may want to set a goal of performing at a specific PSY for the year. Managers and

staff must understand in order to achieve this goal; there are many other measurements to be aware of. Breeding performance, sow mortality, health, culling rates as well as farrowing house performance all contribute to that number. It may be more valuable to breakdown the larger goal into smaller ones. It can also be very beneficial to provide producer/employee incentives based on specific areas lacking in performance.

Herd management

Properly managed and accurate records should allow producers and employees to more effectively manage their breeding herds. Information should be available to make mating, culling and farrowing house management decisions. Effective herd management is not only financially vital to a production system, but can also be very important to health strategies.

Breeding management

Proper breeding flow for an individual facility can be achieved much more easily if records are up to date. Many sites have practices in place to identify sows which are in heat, open for breeding or gestating. Organization and records management can allow producers/employees to make quick decisions and save time in the breeding barn by knowing which animals to focus on for matings and boar exposure.

Gilt management

Gilt management can be very difficult at times based on season, availability and space. Farm to farm management of gilts varies greatly, but can have a lasting impact on a farm's performance and profitability. Knowing how long the gilt has been on farm for acclimation, achieving appropriate breeding age and knowing when to cull a "stale" animal are all valuable informational pieces.

Inventory management

A very common issue involves culling practices. One must provide a proper balance of gilt introduction and culling of the current herd to make improvements and maintain parity balance. Information located within a given record system should allow personnel to see, at a minimum, a short past production history of each sow. Many times this comes in the form of a sow card. This sow card should

provide historical information including matings, parity, pigs born and pigs weaned. At weaning, the culling decision might be based on born alive, piglet mortality or pigs weaned. In the breeding barn, the decision might be based on how long the sow/gilt has been open or how many previous matings have been performed.

Herd health analysis

Records can also provide a more objective view of what is going on with the health of a herd. When a farm experiences a problem which may be health related, it is absolutely important to have accurate records available for management staff and veterinary support. Although it is always important to have a vet review the physical aspects of the farm and the herd itself, many times records can provide an indication of an issue long before it is visually apparent. Increased mortalities, stillborns, mummies or lower conception rates can all be indications of health related issues. These types of trends can be picked up on much more readily if the information is recorded accurately and made available. Individual issues alone may be difficult to pinpoint, but a full picture can be seen many times when records are aligned with physical indications.

Constraints

All record systems have one major (and seemingly obvious) constraint. All the systems available, whether computer driven or individually maintained, require human input and thus have an almost inevitable chance for failure. Human error is inevitable. Some data management systems have built in warnings or flags to try and prevent

some of the more common errors, but none of these are fail-safe. Continued evaluation and updating of records can help minimize this issue and help producers spot inconsistencies and hopefully correct issues in a timely manner.

Another issue can be ease of use. Many times reports driven by the management systems in use do not always give one all the information needed. At times it may be necessary to do further analysis to glean the specific type of information desired.

Data input and transfer time may also be an issue especially in cases where an outside office or vendor compiles the data. Sometimes turn-around time in this type of situation may hinder accurate and timely decisions while one waits for updated records to arrive.

Conclusion

Accurate, timely and individually tailored records can be extremely vital to the continued success of a production system. Not only is the farm itself reliant on making informed and strategic decisions, but the decisions made can impact the larger business or production system as a whole. Planning and setting targets, managing the herd and supplying information for herd health analysis all depend on the focus and accuracy of production records and farm history. Though there are constraints, as mentioned above, with proper management and preparation those constraints and their effect can be minimized.

