

Livestock Production

Improve your cow herd with CHAPS

Key Points

- CHAPS gives North Dakota ranchers a tool to improve herds.
- The program organizes information on cow herds in a usable form.
- Entering 360 cow records takes about 20 hours.

By LORETTA SORENSEN

AMANDA Talkington knows cattle. She started learning when she was just a little girl, feeding calves, milking cows or whatever the daily agenda required at her grandmother's dairy farm. Today, she manages 360 Black Angus cow-calf pairs she and husband Shane raise on their western North Dakota ranch near Belfield.

But Amanda has learned that really knowing how individual cattle perform and accurately predicting the quality of their calves takes much more analysis and review than she could possibly accomplish by reading through her handwritten notebook. That's why she and Shane established a computerized record of their cattle more than 10 years ago with the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software, or CHAPS.

"Before we went to CHAPS, we tried using a spreadsheet to review our information," Amanda says. "With 360 cows, that just didn't work. With CHAPS reports, we can see exactly what each of our cows has done and how consistently they perform year to year. It's been very helpful in decisions about eliminating certain cows and genetics from our herd. We can more easily identify our most profitable cows."

Among the information Amanda records are conception rates, calving intervals, weaning weights and overall calf quality. Cow records are grouped according to sire so decisions about bulls can be based on progeny data.

"It can take four or five years to identify exactly how a cow will perform," Amanda says. "With CHAPS, it's much easier to see performance trends by reviewing several years of each cow's individual data."

In selecting sires, the Talkingtons rely on expected progeny differences to aid their choices. However, heifers coming from a preferred sire don't always live up



PRODUCERS AT WORK: Working calves are (left to right) Shane Talkington's father, Curt; Shane; Amanda Talkington, and Amanda's father, Lee Alderin.

to predictions.

"I think there are performance surprises every year," Amanda says. "Sometimes cows do better than we anticipate. We always have to balance performance records in light of environmental conditions. Every summer, differing rainfall amounts and temperatures affect how cows and calves perform."

The Talkingtons' focus on developing the best possible genetics led Amanda to



LIFELONG LOVE: Amanda Talkington enjoys working with the Black Angus she and her husband, Shane, raise.

search for a feedlot that would provide carcass data on their calves, even though they don't retain ownership at the feedlot. In addition to tracking carcass quality, Amanda wanted to obtain details about their calves' feed efficiency.

"Most feedlots don't provide carcass data if they buy the calves," Amanda says. "We're fortunate that Beller Feedlot [Nebraska] agreed to do that. We use that information to cull cows that don't consistently produce good carcass quality."

As she began tracking carcass data, Amanda was pleasantly surprised to see how well their cattle performed in terms

of meat quality. In 2012, their steers graded 99% choice or higher. She will continue to track carcass data to ensure that they reach future production goals.

"It's challenging to keep the records up," Amanda says. "I usually enter data in winter when I have more free time. It probably takes around 20 hours to enter all of it. I keep a binder for each year that contains a printed record of each cow's performance. Having the printed records makes it easier to compare yearly performance and trace pedigrees."

Amanda also uses her data to manage pasture use and track which herds occupied specific pastures for the season. The records also make artificial insemination planning easier.

"In the past, I couldn't tell you for sure which cows were in which pasture," Amanda says. "Now I know exactly where each one is all summer. Our analysis also helped us manage our leased Forest Service acres during the drought. We had 20% fewer cattle on those acres. Because we had such good data, we pulled out our poorest cows and culled them."

She also notes cow disposition in her records and culls those animals that are risky to work around.

"To reach production goals, it's important to have some kind of analysis program," Amanda adds. "It's time-consuming to enter the data, but in the end, it saves time and improves profitability."

Sorensen writes from Yankton, S.D.

A tool for acquiring knowledge

CHAPS, or Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software, is a data intensive beef production record system developed by the North Dakota State University Extension Service through the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association.

CHAPS has been reviewed and approved by the national Integrated Resource Management Coordinating Committee of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. It is available for downloading (www.CHAPS2000.com). The computer program tracks beef cattle production from conception to carcass, analyzing performance, genetics and meat quality along the way. CHAPS data analysis is also available by mailing cattle records to the central processing facility at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1133 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601.

CHAPS 2000 has been described as the beef industry's tool for acquiring knowledge. That data becomes knowledge producers can use to affect changes within a beef herd so cow-calf producers can make decisions necessary to produce high-quality beef for the food industry. The more documented records available on each cow, the better equipped producers are to make bold, decisive decisions about culling, selecting and mating systems. — *Loretta Sorensen*

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