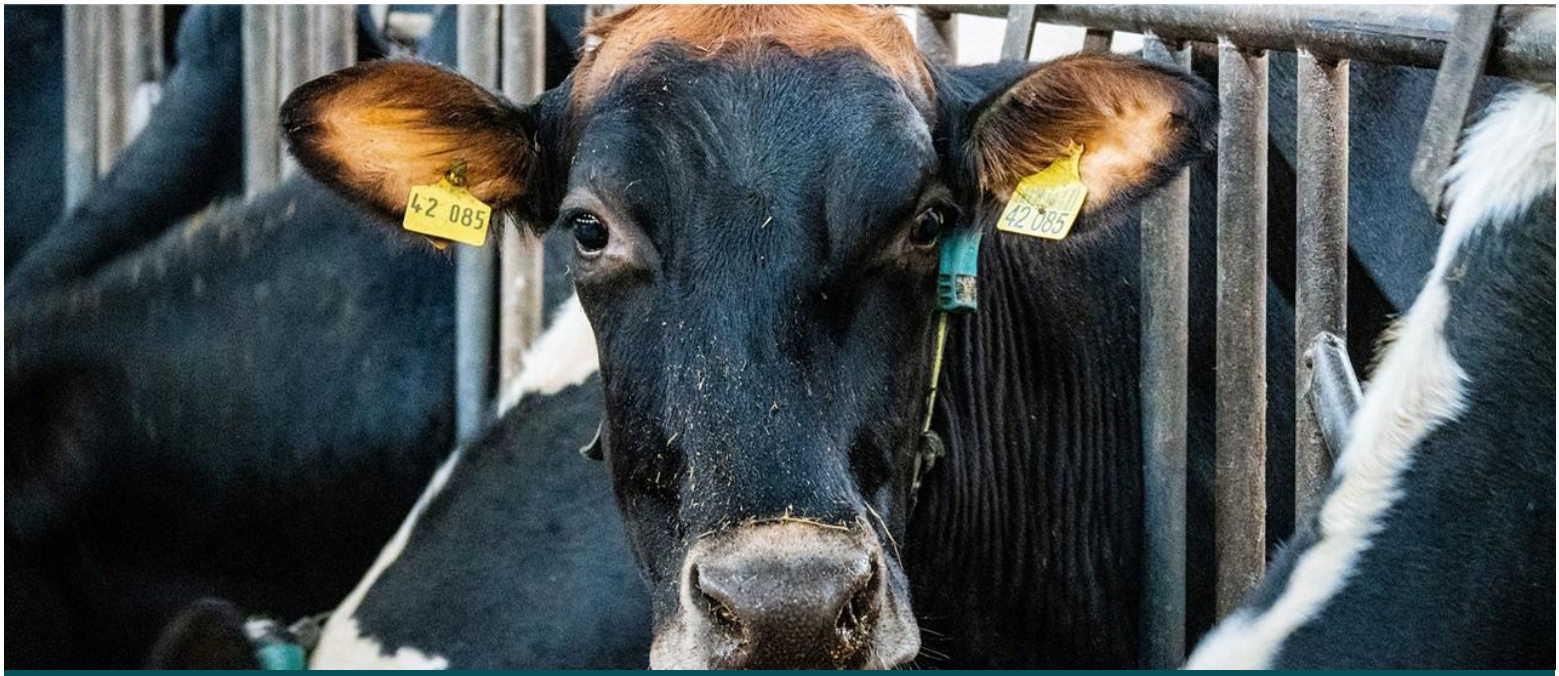
LIVESTOCK

Recordkeeping for Beginning Farmers



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SECTIONS

Section 1: Recordkeeping for Beginning Farmers

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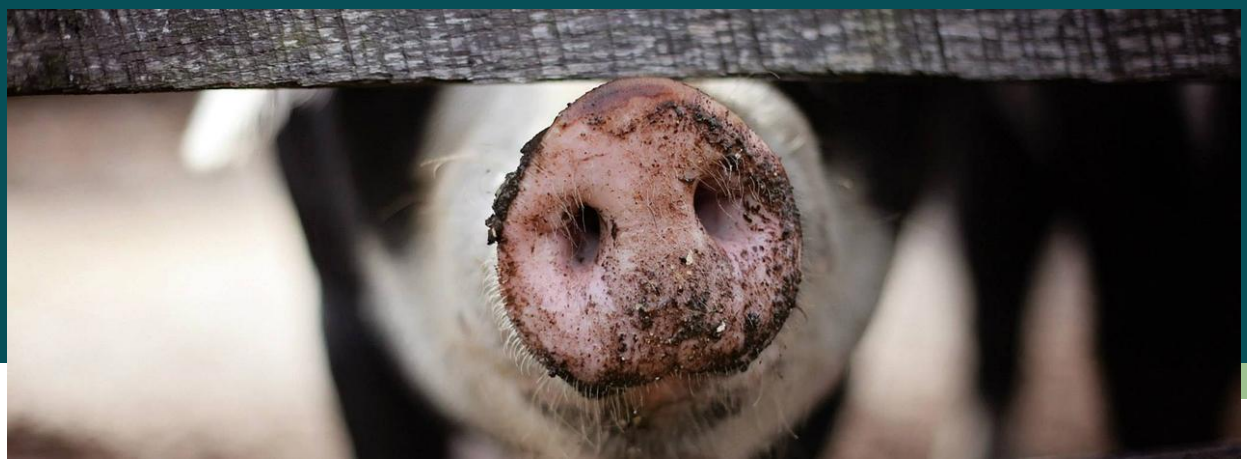
INTRODUCTION

Recordkeeping is the foundation of livestock production that separates successful operations from those that struggle. Records capture the details that will make decision making easier and help operations save money, time, and ultimately build a more profitable venture.

How To Get Started with Farm Recordkeeping

Begin with the basics: these are the areas to focus on first, which could include animal health, feed costs, financial, and production data. The key is to start simple and build gradually as you identify further needs. Remember, financial records need to be kept for income tax purposes.

There are different ways to keep records ranging from basic pen and paper to sophisticated computer/phone applications. Choose what is most comfortable and easiest for you to maintain.



SECTION 1

Recordkeeping for Beginning Farmers

Primary Considerations for Livestock Recordkeeping

Livestock can be purchased through different avenues, and each option will have its own advantages and disadvantages. Remember that all newly purchased animals should be isolated from animals already on the farm to protect from potentially spreading diseases (please reference the Health Management and Disease Prevention section for more information).

Critical questions

Before recording any information, ask yourself these three questions:

1. Will you use this information to make management decisions?

What is the value of the data being collected?. Ensure information is being collected accurately and utilized to assist in making informed decisions.

2. How will information be collected and recorded?

Deciding on what system or method your operation will use can help you determine the best way to store the data. Producers can use pen and paper notebooks, spreadsheets, or computer-based systems to record their data. Regardless of what system is chosen, it must be easy for the producer to input and maintain accurate data.

3. How are you analyzing and interpreting collected data?

Depending on the type of analysis you want, you may consider using:

- Spreadsheets to analyze numbers, such as feed costs or rate of gain.
- Expected Progeny Difference (EPD) data to assist in making breeding decisions.
- Health data to assist producers in medication inventory, vaccination schedules, withdrawal times, and individual animal health history.

There are various computer programs that may integrate some or all of this data.

The Process for Getting Started

Step 1: Choose Your Recording Method

- **Digital options:** Smartphone apps, cloud-based software, or computer programs
- **Physical options:** Notebooks, barn cards, or wall charts
- **Hybrid approach:** Collect data physically, then transfer to digital systems

Step 2: Establish Your Categories

The categories outlined below offer an extensive list of potential recordkeeping options. Producers do not need to track everything. Focus on recording what makes the most sense for your specific production and financial goals. Consider working with experienced advisors such as veterinarians, Extension Educators, or seasoned producers who can help you determine which metrics will be most valuable for your situation. Some livestock breed organizations/associations may have recordkeeping tools that could assist you in animal data management.

General Animal Information

- Date of birth, sire, dam, offspring lineage
- Ear tag number, tattoos, microchips, and/or barn name
- Registered name (for breeding or show stock)
- Purchase information: source, date acquired, purchase price, transport costs
- Physical characteristics: breed, color, markings, horn status
- Insurance information and coverage details

Health Records

- Genetic testing and EPD data
- Veterinary care: surgeries, hoof trimming, disbudding/dehorning, castration, dental work
- Preventive care: vaccination schedules, deworming protocols, implants, hoof care routines
- General health: non-life-threatening injuries, lameness incidents, body condition scoring
- Medications: vaccines (product, batch number, expiration date, withdrawal times), antimicrobials (dosage, method of delivery, treatment duration), pain management, and supplements
- Diagnostic testing: blood work results, pregnancy checks, disease testing (TB, Brucellosis, etc.)
- Mortality records: date, cause of death, necropsy results, disposal method

Reproduction Tracking

- Breeding management: estrus cycles, breeding methods (natural service, AI, embryo transfer)
- Breeding dates, sire information, breeding technician details
- Pregnancy monitoring: confirmation dates, due dates, ultrasound results
- Calving/birthing: date, time, assistance required, complications
- Offspring details: offspring identification, birth weight, vigor scores, colostrum intake timing, and amount
- Weaning information: date, weight, method, stress indicators
- Reproductive problems: difficult births, retained placenta, breeding failures, cystic ovaries

Production Data

- Dairy: birth weight, milk yield, milk components (fat, protein, somatic cell count), lactation curves
- Beef: birth weight, weaning weight, average daily gain, feed conversion ratios, finish weight, carcass data (hanging weight, grade, yield)
- Poultry: Layers–egg production; Meat birds–average daily gain, feed conversion ratio, carcass weight
- Swine: litter size, weaning weights, feed efficiency, backfat measurements, finishing weights, carcass data (hanging weight, grade, yield)
- Small ruminants (sheep and goats): fiber production (fleece weight and quality), milk production, carcass data (hanging weight, grade, yield)

Feed and Nutrition Records

- Feed consumption: daily intake by individual or group, feed refusal amounts
- Feed inventory: types, quantities, storage dates, costs, supplier information
- Ration changes: dates, reasons, formulations, nutritionist recommendations
- Supplement administration: minerals, vitamins, additives, medication in feed
- Pasture management: rotation schedules, grazing days, forage quality testing
- Water consumption and quality testing results

Financial and Economic Data

- Income tracking: product sales, animal sales, breeding fees, show winnings
- Expense categories: feed costs, veterinary bills, equipment/facility maintenance, utilities, facilities, bedding, advertising, memberships, etc.
- Cost per animal: purchase price, breeding fees, daily feed costs, total cost of production, disposal costs
- Insurance
- Tax-related information

Faculty and Equipment Records

- Housing assignments: pen numbers, group compositions, moves between facilities
- Equipment maintenance: repair dates, costs, preventive maintenance schedules
- Facility modifications: upgrades, repairs, compliance improvements
- Environmental controls: temperature logs, ventilation settings, lighting schedules
- Utility usage: electricity, water, fuel consumption by facility and equipment

Environmental and Regulatory Compliance

- Manure management: application dates, nutrient content, field locations, weather conditions
- Water usage and quality: testing results, conservation measures, source monitoring
- Regulatory inspections: dates, results, corrective actions required
- Certification compliance: organic, animal welfare, quality assurance program requirements
- Environmental permits and renewals

Marketing and Customer Relations

- Customer information: contact details, purchase history, preferences
- Product delivery: dates, quantities, quality specifications
- Customer feedback: complaints, compliments, special requests
- Market channels: direct sales, auctions, processors, distributors
- Pricing strategies: seasonal adjustments, volume discounts, premium products

Competition Results (for those marketing animals based on show performance)

- Competition details: show dates, classes entered, placing, judge comments

Step 3: Create Your Data Collection Routine

- Set specific times for data entry
- Keep recording materials easily accessible
- Develop shortcuts and abbreviations for common entries
- Back up digital records regularly

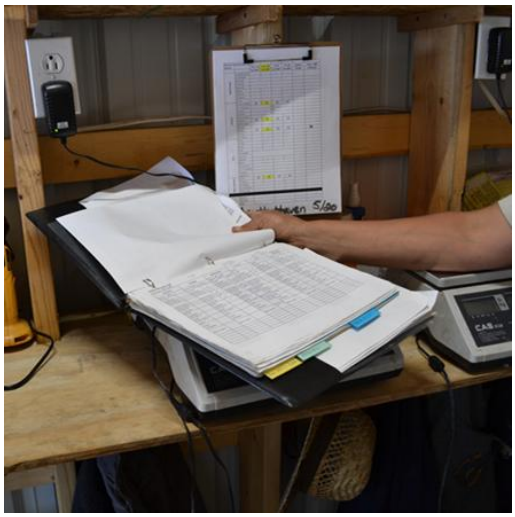
Step 4: Regular Review and Analysis

- Schedule monthly reviews of collected data
- Look for patterns and trends
- Identify areas for improvement
- Adjust recording methods as needed

Storing Records

Paper Records

For paper-based recordkeeping, maintain organized storage systems with reliable backup copies. This dual approach enables you to cross-reference information and identify important trends over time. Consider using fireproof filing systems or storing backup copies in a separate, secure location.



Combining Paper and Digital Records

Using both paper and digital records together creates a robust system for information verification. You can cross-reference entries between formats to ensure accuracy, catch potential errors, and maintain data integrity. This hybrid approach also provides additional security, as having information in multiple formats reduces the risk of total data loss.

Digital Records

When using digital data collection and storage programs, implement daily backup procedures to protect against system failures and ensure continuous access to your information. Automated backup solutions can streamline this process and reduce the risk of data loss.

Security Considerations

Be aware of the origin of data collection services and programs and who may have access to the data that is inputted.

RECORDKEEPING FOR BEGINNING FARMERS

COMMON QUESTIONS

01 What's the minimum I need to track to be successful?

Start with health records (vaccinations, treatments), basic production data (milk/eggs), and financial inputs (feed costs, veterinary expenses). These three categories provide the foundation for most management decisions and are often required for insurance or certification purposes.

02 How do I choose between paper and digital recordkeeping?

Consider your comfort level with technology, internet reliability, and where you will be recording data. Paper works everywhere but can be lost or damaged. Digital systems offer better analysis tools but require consistent data entry. Many successful producers use a hybrid approach: collecting data on paper in the field, then transferring to digital systems.

03 How long should I keep my records?

Health and treatment records should be kept for at least 3 years (required for food safety programs). Financial records should be kept for at least 7 years for tax purposes. Production records are valuable for trend analysis – keep at least 3-5 years to identify patterns. Some genetic or breeding records may have lifetime value.

04 What if I miss recording something or make a mistake?

No one is perfect. Estimate missing data when possible and note it as an estimate. Develop a system for handling gaps – perhaps a weekly review where you fill in missing information while the information is still fresh. The key is consistency.

05 How do I know if my recordkeeping system is working?

Evaluate your system by asking: Can you quickly find information when you need it? Are you using the data to make decisions? Has your recordkeeping helped you save money or improve production? If you're not using the data you collect, simplify your system to focus on actionable information.

Necessary resources and Partners – Please see Livestock Resources and Partners Appendix at the end of this chapter.