Farm records are a valuable asset but data entry in many farms is a challenge because of the quantity of information involved. Today, the amount of data necessary to meet regulations and make better management decisions is continuously increasing. Good records require complete, accurate, and efficient data entry about individual cows, crops, expenses, employee hours, etc. If your records are complete, accurate, and up-to-date, a review can help evaluate progress toward established business goals. If your system lacks completeness or is not generating the right data summaries, though, it may be a good time to consider investing in your record systems to benefit your business.

Each year it seems that more record keeping is required. A partial list of records that are required on a dairy farm include: production records on cows, crops and other enterprises; reproduction and health records on cattle; business records including income and expenses for taxes and business analysis, payroll records for labor laws and tax deductions; and, environmental records of manure nutrient management. Relatively new records may include individual animal identification and agricultural product security and biosecurity.

Your business goals should include efficiently gathering and entering data so that you have useful, up-to-date farm records. On many farms the spouse traditionally has done the record keeping. Today many farm spouses work off the farm with little time left to work on farm records. Some farms may split up the tasks of data entry, with one partner or individual responsible for the financial records and another responsible for production, crop, and other records.

Using Data Entry Sheets
First, you need a system for employees and management to compile and organize information for entry into your record system. The old shoe box method of storing farm financial records is not seen very often today, yet a large pile of invoices is not an uncommon sight at the end of each month. The corn hybrid pocket notepad can still be a helpful tool. However, it may not be large enough to provide the categories for all the required information. A clipboard with the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program record keeping sheet for manure applications (available at <http://www.maeap.org>) may ensure that employees enter all needed information for a potential Michigan Department of Agriculture or Depart-
ment of Environmental Quality complaint inspection. A health treatment record input form can be used to record individual cow treatments that are later recorded in your permanent file. Your paper and file system or prepared input sheets can be very helpful for employees and the person recording and entering data. Compare ideas with your neighbors for data sheets that work well for their farm.

**Benchmarking**

Other authors recommend key production indicators as benchmark goals to assist managing your dairy. When you identify these indicators for your farm you can define the data required. Benchmarks can be found at several university or DHIA web sites.

Two financial sources that may be useful are <http://cdp.wisc.edu/AgFA.htm> and <http://www.cffm.umn.edu/index.aspx>. Dairy production benchmark figures may be obtained from <http://www.drms.org/dairymetrics.html>.

An example of a key production indicator that requires data is the pregnancy rate in your herd. This is often recorded as a percent of cows that conceived against the number of cows with eligible estrous cycles over a period of time. This requires collecting a lot of data to then enter and calculate the appropriate figures for comparison. Quality data summarized and graphed for your key production indicators can be a huge help to monitor your success in the reproduction program.

Another example may be the incentive pay program for your employees to improve milk quality. To make the incentive meaningful, accurate data must be collected and reported so every employee sees the results of their efforts and understands their role in improving the herds’ somatic cell and bacteria counts.

**Using Computers**

All of these record needs can be made more efficient by the use of a computer. As the need for more records mount, the purchase of a computer makes more economic and time management sense. The problem then becomes the initial investment time to learn about the computer and software plus timely and accurate data entry.

**Some Data Entry Options**

Computer systems can have linked payroll or check writer software that automatically enters expenses in the accounting system. One such option is the Telfarm system offered through Michigan State University Extension’s Farm Information Resources Management Team (available at <http://www.canr.msu.edu/telfarm>). Another option is to use a personal digital assistant (PDA) to synchronize the data to your computer. This saves you from entering data twice and can be done on the site of the management task. PCDART software (available at <http://www.drms.org/>) also has the ability to utilize radio frequency identification (RFID) to accurately scan tags and transfer information to the computer. Many other parlor systems have similar electronic equipment or will shortly.

Agribusiness consultants who work with your farm require data to help solve problems. A frustrating situation is the availability of little or no information to provide current status or long-term trend analysis. I am reminded of a dairy farm that had a severe calf disease problem. Several management and facility changes were implemented over a year, yet they struggled to clear up the problem. Several variables likely impacted the disease. Without records how do you know that your management changes are effective?

**Ways to Get The Job Done**

The problem still becomes accurate data entry. Larger farms often hire companies or secretaries to assist with the data entry for payroll, accounting and production record systems. Consider hiring someone for data entry on your farm, even if it is only a part-time employee, to free up critical management time for you. An employee could be shared between several farms needing the same accounting or data entry skills. Let’s admit it, your typing skills are likely not any better than mine!

Another way to make sure that data entry occurs on the farm is to enroll in programs that offer it as a service. DHIA comes to mind as the obvious program that assists in data entry by employees or technicians. The software available can calculate many common production, reproduction, and health measures and graph them for visual monitoring. If you are not presently using DHIA consider its record-keeping benefits worth the cost. With regularly scheduled testing, the data entry job gets done. In addition, you have access to your records and can generate many reports for cow management, vet checks, etc. Further, you and your consultants have access to software and records from other herds in the US to make management comparisons for benchmarking. One such resource is available at <http://www.drms.org/dairymetrics.html>.

Do you love doing paper work and record keeping? Likely not or you would have chosen another profession, such as an accountant. But you can consider a number of ways to make data entry on your farm less painful and more efficient. Review your farm’s prior year records for the strengths and weaknesses in your business. What key performance indicators do you need, and have you gathered the necessary data to monitor them? How can you more easily enter those data to provide information that will help you reach your goals? I hope you are successful in reviewing your record system, improving the efficiency of data entry, and the resulting monitoring of your progress.

The following Web sites have been referenced;

Center Farm Financial Management http://www.cffm.umn.edu/index.aspx

Michigan Ag. Environmental Assurance http://www.maeap.org
Telfarm Microtel http://www.canr.msu.edu/telfarm/
U. Wisc. Center Dairy Profitability http://cdp.wisc.edu/
AgFA.htm