

Benchmarking 101

Dr. Ray Reynen
September 2018

How good are we doing? Are we better than last year or the year before? How am I doing compared to my peers? These are all valid and important questions that we should be able to answer.

Sounds simple, but if we want to compare to ourselves or others we need to be sure we are calculating our numbers accurately and the numbers are useful.

Many sources (vet clinics, DHI, feed mills, accountants) offer data to monitor your farms. For all of them we need to be sure we are giving them good data and if we wish to compare to the rest of the group that the source is ensuring the others are collecting good data.

For example # 1 – What is your preweaning mortality (not including stillborns)? Many record at the time of death but a lot record the death when they cannot find the calf to vaccinate...so when did she die pre or post weaning?

For example #2 – What is your RP rate? Does everyone use the same definition of an RP? Most record if the membranes are still in the cow after 24 hours, some record only if the cow get sick.

So step one is make sure we are collecting good data so we can compare to ourselves and that the group is collecting in a similar manner.

Step two - look at useful data and compare carefully.

Is 21 day pregnancy risk always the same? NO. You can alter the VWP period from the setting that come from DHI. Each company calculating 21 day pregnancy risk can calculate a little differently. Do they give you a number for the whole year? Half year? Does everyone remove all cows listed as “do not breed cows”? Pregnancy risk has become the repro monitor we have all gravitated to but just make sure we are comparing apples to apples. To compare to your peers do you want to compare to average, to other herds of the same size, to other herds with same housing style (tie stall vs freestall)? For me, I would suggest comparing to herds of similar housing style and herd size. Comparing to average is fair if we strive to be average, or I would suggest ranking against the 75th or 90th percentiles if we wish to aim higher.

We looked at our pregnancy risk and we want more. We make a change how fast will it change? Pregnancy risk is usually calculated over a whole year so if the last 3 week period amazingly improves by 17 points but the year is a collection of 17- 3 week periods the annual number will change only by one if the number to breed in each time period is the

same. This delay or lag can be frustrating so you may need to look at shorter time periods; however, with shorter time periods data can fluctuate wildly.

This example of lag is an important concept when comparing to yourself. Another great example is our heifer repro is less than stellar (PS what is Ont average) because we are under feeding. We change the feeding situation in the post weaned calf but we might not be breeding them for a year. Better be patient.

We commonly look at reproductive data, production data, disease/death data, feed cost, culling data, etc.

All can be very useful, but we need to compare apples to apples. Is fat per cow per day always the same from bulk tank or DHI? Rarely and there are many reasons for that. Fat percent is calculated differently, are all cows in the tank (treated/ fresh). Is the litre per cow the same from the mil meters or the bulk tank?

There are many examples of comparing different numbers. Trust your advisor and give them good data. I am huge advocate of comparing to yourself year by year. Knowing how you rank in a comparable data set can be motivating . Just be sure of the comparability of the data set.

So do you have good data? Give it to your advisors. Monitor your changes. Discuss future changes to improve yourself.

Happy number crunching