

WEST CENTRAL MISSOURI
SUMMER 2011

Simple mechanics for a market survey

Attendance, often difficult to determine at a farmers' market, can be estimated with pre-planning and a few people armed with hand counters. Station a person at each major entrance into the market and count visitors for 15 minutes at the top of each hour the market is open. Multiply the results by 4 (the number of 15-minute segments in an hour) to estimate the number of visitors to the market for that particular day.

Dot surveys provide consumer feedback through the use of a few questions that can be answered by placing a dot sticker on the answer that best corresponds to the visitor's response. Post a series of three to five questions, each with three to four multiple-choice answers, on an easel to gather quick responses. Seeing that other market-goers have participated in the survey decreases apprehension in other prospective respondents.



a look ahead

July 12 - Small Fruit Production Workshop, Lafayette County Extension Center, (660) 584-3658

July 23 - Grape Production Workshop, Platte County Fair, (816) 270-2141

July 26 - Turfgrass and Ornamental Field Day, MU South Farms, Columbia, motoc.org/fd

July 29 - Energy and Input Conservation Field Day, Lafayette County Extension Center, (660) 584-3658

Rapid assessment tool for farmers' markets

Implementing changes in a farmers' market can be a struggle. Using data collection to identify vendor-related issues and shoppers' concerns can help a market tackle problem areas. Making improvements can aid in creating an atmosphere favorable for attracting shoppers.

Rapid Market Assessment is an easy, inexpensive evaluation tool that can be implemented at any time during the market season. Oregon State University Extension Service developed a three-prong method that includes collecting attendance numbers, dot surveys and constructive comments and observations.

This system offers an analytical approach to addressing market needs. RMA is best implemented by a group of non-biased administrators. Typically this is a group of market masters who are not associated with your market but are willing to assist in its improvement.

Collecting constructive comments and third-party observations can reveal in-depth perceptions of the market

and its vendors. RMA administrators walk the market, noting in writing: likes; dislikes; physical characteristics of the market, vendors and products; and a description of the overall market atmosphere.

The collected information is compiled into a report, including the previously obtained visitor counts and dot survey information. The report is presented to the market master or market board for its use in bettering the market.

A complete RMA can provide valuable information. Typically, the only associated costs are poster board, stickers and the time of volunteers administering the evaluation.

To prevent customer burn-out, market surveys should be conducted only once or twice a year.

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Confirm the cycle of each cow in the herd

Once calving is complete, cows in the herd should begin cycling. A quick check of the cow herd can be made by remembering that the average estrous cycle of the cow is 21 days.

If all the cows are cycling, about 5 percent should be expressing signs of being in heat each day (one day divided by 21 days). Assume a 100 cow herd; an average of five cows should be in heat or estrus on any given day.

Not all the cows calve during the first 21 days of the calving season. In fact, typically only 58 percent of the cows calve the first 21 days of the calving season.

For the producer who typically exposes a mature bull to 30 cows, at least one cow should be in heat every day early in the breeding season.



Economic reasons to monitor bulls

Too often, producers focus their attention solely on cows in the herd, neglecting the value of the bulls.

Before breeding season started this year, many herd bulls went through fertility checks. After bull turnout, continual monitoring of the bull battery is necessary.

Producers need to check and recheck both cows and bulls. For a quick reference, ask yourself: In the past seven days, how many times did I check the cows and how many times did I check the bulls?

In many cases, producers focus their attention on the cows. How many producers really check their bulls? Too often the fertility test is a quick stop at the local veterinary clinic on the way to the cow pasture.

Producers can accomplish a great deal by simply assessing the vim and vigor of their bulls. Not only are the genetics of a bull important but his ability to breed is equally critical. Unfortunately, most cattle are bred out on pasture

and daily surveillance is not possible. But producers should stay alert.

Second-cycle cows give birth later in the calving season. Once these cows start to cycle, the typical producer would have 27 percent of the cows calving within the second 21 days of the calving season.

If the mature bull is exposed to 30 cows and everything is going right, 17 or 18 cows (58 percent) should have already settled with next year's calf in the first cycle. That leaves eight or nine cows to breed in the second 21-day period of bull exposure.

Do the math. The bull that was breeding at least one cow a day during the first 21 days, will be breeding only one cow every other day during the second 21 days of the breeding

season. In other words, the typical bull should be half as busy during the second half of the season.

If the bull is breeding at a similar or greater rate after being exposed to the cows for three weeks, you may have a problem.

Most producers do not argue the value of the bull, but the magnitude of that value is often underestimated. If calf gain is 2.3 pounds per day while nursing, every time a bull misses a cow in heat will cost the producer more than 48 pounds of calf weaning weight. Therefore, close observation is a must.

Assessing the bull's ability to breed is as critical as his genetics.

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Comparing the costs and benefits of cover crops

Cover crops are tools that farm managers can use to manage the soil. Like other tools on the farm, cover crops require some economic investment. Unlike many other tools on the farm, cover crops are biological tools. The biological characteristic of cover crops makes analyzing their economic returns (or profitability) very complex.

The costs associated with using cover crops can be separated into three general categories: materials, machinery and labor and opportunity costs. Material costs include seed, fertilizer and herbicide, all of which vary greatly.

Some growers choose to forgo applying fertilizer to a cover crop. Others, especially those using a small grain cover crop, may opt to apply fertilizer in order to encourage

faster establishment and growth of the cover crop.

Like fertilizer costs, herbicide costs may or may not need to be incorporated into a comparison of cover crop costs and benefits. Some cover crop species will winter-kill while others will resume growth in the spring. Only those species that survive the winter will need to be killed before planting the following cash crop. Instead of an herbicide application, a grower may opt to mechanically kill a growing cover crop.

In general, machinery and labor costs to establish a cover crop range from \$12 to \$15 for drilling and \$6 to \$10 for broadcast seeding per acre. Machinery and labor costs for other management practices, such as fertilizer and/or herbicide application, also need to be considered in a comparison of cover crop costs and benefits if those practices are implemented.

Opportunity costs also need to be factored into the cost-benefit comparison. An example of a potential opportunity cost is the value of any yield loss incurred because of the cover crop. Yield may or may not improve with the use of a cover crop; therefore it is important to at least consider the value of any potential yield loss that might be due to the complications associated with using a cover crop.

There is tremendous complexity surrounding the economic benefits of cover crops. Despite this challenge, cover crops can still be expected to perform significant services that should not be undervalued in a long-run assessment of a cropping system.

Weighing attributes of cover crops

Research has shown many benefits are associated with the use of cover crops.

Cover crops prevent soil erosion, reduce fertilizer inputs, increase organic matter, conserve soil moisture, suppress weeds and improve soil structure.

Placing an economic value on all of these benefits is difficult. Multiple factors complicate appraising the benefits. One of the principal reasons for this difficulty is that cover crops are biologically dynamic.

Cover crops respond differently to varying soil environments, weather patterns and management practices. These environmental and management factors, along with genetic diversity, affect all of the cover crop's attributes.

These attributes include the cover crop's rooting depth, level of biomass production and bio-chemical composition.

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Handling prosperity in the face of rising land prices

Bidding away farm profits commonly involves rapidly rising land prices. Formerly predictable 6-percent annual gains in land prices have skyrocketed with up to 12-percent annual increases, and, of course, rent follows. Cash rent in much of the state typically hovered around 4 percent of the market value of land; now it is close to 6 percent.

There are ways to slow this upward progression and limit your rent exposure to crop or price failures. One option is a flexible lease agreement, which sets a base cash rent paid to the landlord with rent increases based on yield. Fairly simple, the tenant and landlord determine the base rent and the base yield. At harvest, a portion of the yield above the base yield is shared with the landlord.

Remember the base rent per acre varies within the West Central Region. The base rent should be set slightly below top dollar in your area. A suggested method to set the base yield is to use the average yield for the rental acreage for the past few years plus 10 percent.

As an example, assume the flexible lease agreement sets base rent at \$150 per acre and the base yield at 165 bushels of corn. If the yield is 175 bushels, then the landlord would receive the \$150 rent plus a portion of the yield over 165 bushels. If the agreement was 35 percent above the base yield, the landlord would receive the value of 3.5 bushels. With a market price of \$6 per bushel, the landlord would receive another \$21 per acre. A flexible lease agreement allows the landlord to benefit from a good year and also limits the cash rent paid by the producer in a poor year.

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