

Reimagining the Fiscal and Operational Structure of the University of Missouri AES Beef Cattle Units

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Identifying the Project:

In 2021, the University of Missouri Agriculture Experiment Station (administered by the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources) reorganized 22 statewide farms and centers into four regional research, education and education centers (REEC). Within these centers, three (southwest, northern and central) REECs operated beef cattle units. Historically, these units were operated as stand-alone, siloed business units with no coordination within or between physical footprints. Administration and fiscal oversight were similarly organized. Administratively, the “old” farms and centers had superintendents and farm managers. Today, each REEC has a director and most individual animal units have a manager. Many of the managers transferred into the new system with “old” system memory and extreme autonomy for operational and fiscal decision-making authority. The REECs own and operate a beef cow-calf enterprise with approximately 1300 cow units. These cow-calf units are physically located on five separate land units dispersed across the state. Units have historically decided management practices at the local level including but not limited to genetics, reproduction, nutrition, animal health and marketing. The opportunity presented itself quite naturally to align the beef cattle production under AES control with a more streamlined approach that fit more closely with the land-grant mission of teaching, research and Extension. Therefore, my FSLI project was born...

Obstacles Affecting the Project:

Multiple obstacles presented during this effort, but none were insurmountable. The first was the embedded institutional culture of “this is how we have always done this” which also included some unintentional fiscal silos of protectionism. To truly integrate the system required buy in from all parties of which some of this was forced at the College level with an edict that reorganization was going to occur and units would be part of this effort. While it wasn’t this explicit, the fact remained that some uncomfortable change was coming. Another obstacle that was quickly solved was that all beef cattle units had been running on their own SOPs with management and fiscal decisions that only served the individual farm without regard to broader land grant mission goals of the college. All unit managers/directors shared their operational and fiscal SOPs with me, and I set out to create one set of

documents that reflected the individual specialties of each farm while embedding their efforts under a larger banner of mission. During the AES reorganization, some staff positions were eliminated as personnel and redundancies were recognized. A few new mid-level administrative positions were created with the understanding that AES would be more streamlined, and some “hard line” personalities were shifted within the system or chose to leave. While this wasn’t easy, it did create an environment more conducive to change. Finally, combining the fiscal effort under one umbrella was challenging really from the perspective that units were not expected to stand alone and units that were more financially viable were balancing the overall fiscal situation in the early months of reorganization. This created some feelings of hardship at first as messaging that everyone is in this together found its way across the system seeking both weigh in and buy in for change.

One obstacle that presented itself several months into this effort was the balancing of political pressure where some of the farms had legislative champions that had traditionally worked to “protect and grow” the entities in their respective districts. Having state level support is critical to the land grant mission and providing clear communication with local legislators was crucial to managing the largest change effort.

Outcomes and Future Plans

This project is far from finished. However, three significant outcomes have resulted from the initial efforts. First, the fiscal model has developed where the regional REECs are locally responsible, but the ability to do business between REECs is much easier. Communication within the beef cattle enterprise is much more transparent and specific units now share data and information related to cattle available at various age and stages of production, so researchers, instructors and Extension personnel better understand what resources are available for their work.

A common fee document was developed and launched where fees are charged for users when the cost or action is above and beyond the normal production practices when animals are owned by the REEC. This reflects the fact that the REEC receives the revenue from their cattle in normal production scenarios and users pay for any expense above the normal practices (specialty feeds, multiple times through the working chute, extraordinary sampling). When users own the animals, all expenses are borne by the user and revenue is returned to the user to satisfy their livestock purchase account (LPA) within the fiscal system.

Ongoing work is reflected in the updating and rewriting of the production SOPs and health SOPs for the beef cattle systems within the AES. These rewrites are led by faculty, veterinarians and cattle production staff within the AES. Most SOPs have been updated at the time of this report.

While the SOPs are useful for animal health and regulatory compliance (animal care and use committee, USDA, etc.), they are often not prescriptive enough to “onboard” new employees or bridge institutional knowledge about a specific unit when there is staff turnover. Therefore, one current effort is building a much more detailed management practice that serves this purpose. For example, the SOP might indicate that the AES farms use estrous synchronization and artificial insemination for breeding females. This level of detail satisfies one aspect of animal production and regulatory compliance. The new

management practice provides specific details about which synchronization protocol is currently in use and exactly how to deploy both the protocol and the process of artificial insemination on that farm with reference to items such as where the semen tanks are stored, how to thaw semen, and where to locate and apply estrous synchronization indicator patches. This level of detail has been received well by new employees and serves as a teaching tool for our instructors where others in the system do not need the burden of being “in the weeds”.

Benefits to Developing this Project within FSLI

The most obvious benefit to developing this project under the FSLI umbrella is the access to the breadth and depth of human resources that have tackled similar scale and scope projects within their own institutions. The ability to bounce the ideas back and forth and to simply talk out loud about the challenges gives the project somewhere to live and evolve while accessing perspectives that don't see through the same “in-house” lens of one's home institution. Furthermore, one of my formal mentors is within my institution and one is at a similar but different land grant university, and he does not share my same disciplinary space. I have embraced the different viewpoints and many of them have been critical to the trajectory and progress of this project. While this project has many moving parts and some won't completely land for months or years, the FSLI component created a situation for accountability for tackling something that would be easy to procrastinate because the work isn't always glorious and some obstacles require perseverance that is fueled by a strong professional network.