

Long-Term Food Storage: Inventory

By: Osage

OK, you've gone out and bought a bunch of good, long-term storage foods. You're even smart enough to begin using the items in your daily diet so you're accustomed to their preparation and your body is accustomed to digesting them. If you're not doing those two, start NOW!

Once you start using these items you must keep track of what you have in order to plan replacement. My wife and I have developed an inventory system which works extremely well for us and may give you some ideas in developing your own system.

We keep our records on index cards. We found 3X5 cards to be a bit small and 5X8's to be way too big, so I cut some 5X8's in half vertically. The size comfortably holds the data we need and fits my wife's main recipe file almost perfectly. Each card tracks one item, be it wheat, honey, macaroni, etc. I'll describe each data field and its location on the card, then I'll attempt to recreate an example card below. The example may not work, depending on the degree of compatibility between your word processor and my current version of MSWord (v9.0.2720), but a picture is worth ... :

Admin Information

- Top line, left side: Item Name in capital letters
- Top line, center: Unit of Issue, that is do I track this by 50# bags or 4-oz packets? Most of our stuff we track by the #10 can, but wheat and other grains we often track by 5-gal bucket or case of six #10 cans due to the large amounts we have and the fast rate at which we expect to use them. Don't track quantity by a bulk measure such as pounds, but by a measure that matches some package which you open.
- Top line, right side: Approximate Weight per package, so we can calculate how much we have against our estimated needs.
- Second line: Inventory Standards - We set three numbers for each basic item or put in "Luxury" for nice-to-have-but-not-necessary items. On the left of the line is "Target", that is the amount we'd like to have. This is a bit above the amount we calculate we need for a 1-year supply for our family of four. At the center of the second line is "Trigger", that is the amount which triggers us to buy more of this item. If the purchase puts us over "target" so much the better. "Trigger" is normally near the amount we need for a 1-year supply. At the right end of the line is "Minimum", that is the amount which causes us to restructure our family budget to buy more until we reach "target" again. Minimum is not a panic button, but a wake-up call that we've slipped and need to get back on the wagon NOW!

Inventory Grid

Below the admin information I skip a few lines then draw a grid of squares using the lines printed on the card with 10 squares per row and as many rows as I need at the time. I add rows as

needed until the card is filled up. Each square represents a unit (top line center) of the item. When we buy some of the item we put the purchase date in the next empty square of the grid and count over the number of squares for the number of units we bought and put the date in the last square. We also put the date in first and last square of each row. We also highlight all squares with that purchase date with a color. The next time we purchase that item we use a different color to highlight those squares.

The System in Operation

When we need some more of an item we pull its card and check for the oldest package of that item in storage. That way we're not just looking for powdered milk, but powdered milk canned in Oct '92. This helps us rotate our store by using the oldest first. When we pull a package for use, we simply draw a diagonal line through the square which represents that package of that item.

We do an inventory check by adding up the unmarked squares for each item and comparing the total to the inventory standards on the second line at the top. We do this every six months at Christmas and Independence Day. Every 2-3 years we do a physical inventory of our food to make sure we're at least close to what's on the card and to check the condition of containers.

Enhancements and Side Notes

Yeah, I could do this on the computer, but at the time we set this up we didn't own one. Now that I have a 14-year-old daughter I don't dare do anything on the computer which might interfere with her computer activities. Leaving the system on index cards has saved family disharmony many times ;>

Some groups of items are counted as part of the same thing in our estimated needs for a 1-year supply. In the case of shortening and cooking oil we have separate cards, but put a note on each one to refer to the other for calculating total need. We do have separate inventory standards for each card. In the case of rolled oats, we like both quick cook and old-fashioned for different uses. We keep both stocks on one card, but in each block with a date we make a note of which type of rolled oats it is.

Some times we buy the same item, such as wheat, in different packages, such as #10 cans and 5-gal pails. In this case we keep separate cards for each package size but put notes on the cards to remind us to total the other packages when we do an inventory check.

When a grid fills a card we start a new card and transfer all existing inventory onto it.

Example Card

RICE #10 can 5.3 lb
Target: 24 Trigger: 20 Min: 15
