

News Column

Stacy Campbell

K-State Research & Extension

March 19, 2015

Bull management prior to the breeding season

Before the breeding season begins, a few simple management procedures involving the bulls can increase the likelihood of a high pregnancy percentage among the cows.

Any rancher that purchases a young, highly fitted or conditioned bull should plan to gradually reduce the fleshiness of the bull before the breeding season. To let these bulls down, it is a good practice to start them on a ration that is not too dissimilar to the one to which they have been accustomed, but that the concentrate portion is 60 to 70 percent of their previous intake. The amount of grain can be reduced at the rate of about 10 percent per week until the desired level is achieved. At the same time, substitutions should be made in the form of quality forages--such as high quality grass hay or alfalfa hay. Ideally, this letdown should be completed prior to the time bulls are turned out. Dramatic nutritional changes can have an adverse effect on semen production, so it is important that these ration modifications be done gradually. Producers need to try to keep the total diet of these young bulls at, or near, 12% crude protein. Therefore the forage needs to be excellent quality. Allow the change of diets to take place gradually, instead of allowing a rapid condition and weight loss during the first of the breeding season, which could be reflected in a reduced calf crop next year.

Other bull management strategies include the following:

In multi-sire pastures, make certain that the bulls that will be pastured together have been in a common trap or pasture prior to the breeding season. Bulls WILL establish a social hierarchy. It is better to get this done before the breeding season begins rather than wait until they are first placed with the cows.

Put young bulls with young bulls and mature bulls with mature bulls. Mixing the ages is will result in the mature bull dominating the younger bull completely, and in some instances causing a serious injury. If the plan is to rotate bulls during the breeding season, then use the mature bulls first, and follow with the yearling bulls in the last third of the breeding season. In this way, the young bulls will have fewer cows to settle, and will be 1 - 2 months older when they start breeding.

Check the feet and have hoof trimming completed at least 30 days prior to the start of the breeding season to avoid lame or sore-footed bulls at the important beginning of the breeding season.

Breeding Soundness Exam (BSE) of Bulls

Soon it will be time to make sure your mature bulls are ready to perform when the trailer gate opens and they're dumped out to pasture.

A BSE exam at least 30-60 days before the start of breeding is recommended. It should include a semen evaluation for semen motility and semen morphology (the structure and form of the sperm cells), detailed examination of the reproductive tract itself, and a physical examination including structural soundness and scrotal shape and size. Remember, a breeding soundness exam does not observe the bull's libido, only his ability to breed. Due to cold spells this winter, examination for frostbite on the bull's scrotum should be included. Frostbite can reduce bull fertility.

With the increasing cases of Trichomoniasis, it is important to make sure you Trich test non-virgin bulls at the time of the breeding soundness exam as well. Trich is a venereal disease which causes fetal loss in cows. It can be catastrophic to cow herds. Bulls need to be sexually rested for 14 days prior to testing.

It is also important to stay up to date on vaccinations for your bulls. Producers should pay attention to diseases that will not only affect the bull, but the cows' reproductive statuses as well. These include Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR), Bovine Viral Diarrhea (BVD), Vibrio, Lepto and Blackleg. Vaccinations should take place at least 61 days ahead of turn out. Reason being in that it takes 61 days for sperm cells to develop from start to finish so we don't want anything to affect that process.

Information provided by Glenn Selk, retired OSU Extension Beef Specialist and Larry Hollis, retired KSU Extension Beef Veterinarian.