

News Column

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What should I be doing to make sure my bulls are ready?

Even though calving season is in full swing throughout the area, the spring breeding season is just around the corner. Now is the time to make sure your bulls are ready to perform when the trailer gate opens and they're dumped out to pasture.

There are several key components to making sure that your bulls are ready. First let's talk about breeding soundness exams. Breeding soundness exams should be conducted 30-60 days before the start of breeding. The practice of conducting a breeding soundness exam provides personal insurance that your bulls are fertile and capable of breeding.

A breeding soundness exam includes 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.

With the presence of Trichomoniasis, otherwise known as Trich, across the state, 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. In order for the test to work, the bulls must be sexually rested for 14 days prior to testing.

Another thing to focus on with bulls is their nutritional status. Just as we do in cows, it is important to body condition score your bulls. On a scale of 1-9, (1 emaciated-9 obese) the optimum body condition score for bulls is 6. Included in nutrition is making sure an adequate vitamin and mineral package is provided. Pay close attention to Vitamin A. Vitamin A is a major influencer of spermatogenesis, the building of sperm cells.

It is also important to stay up to date on vaccinations for your bulls. According to Dr. Larry Hollis, retired K-State Research and Extension Veterinarian, 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.

Don't forget to pay attention to your bull-to-cow ratio. A general rule of thumb for yearling bulls is one cow per month of age of the bull (15 month old bull = 15 cows). Mature bulls can cover anywhere from 25-50 cows. Realize that tremendous variability exists between bulls. Some are capable of breeding many more cows and unfortunately some might breed less.

Bulls are a critical part to every cow calf producer's operation. It is important that they are taken care of properly to ensure their best performance when it becomes "game time". The cost of breeding soundness exams and Trich tests are far cheaper than the cost of open cows. Remember, just because your bull performed last year, does not mean he will do the same this year. With proper nutrition and timely vaccinations, you are setting your bulls up for success.