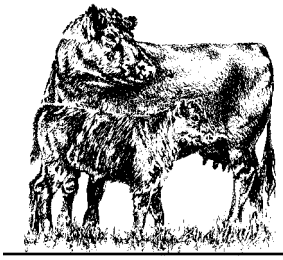

Western Beef Resource Committee *Fourth Edition*

Cattle Producer's Handbook

Reproduction Section 425

Identifying the Functional Bull: Bull Soundness and Management

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Evaluating breeding soundness of bulls is often neglected as a management practice. Producers may tend to believe that bulls in the bull battery for a year or more are of sound breeding value for the rest of their lives. They may also feel that new bulls are sound breeders simply because of some vague or implied guarantee by the seller to replace infertile bulls.

Unfortunately, neither idea may be correct. Bulls that do not settle their share of cows early in the breeding season are contributing to reproductive inefficiency. This can be just as costly as dead calves, although much less dramatic.

Bulls are selected for their genetic potential to improve the cowherd. It is economically important that all bulls are fertile. A breeding soundness examination performed yearly on each bull is the best way to ensure that the producer will get his money's worth from his bull battery.

A basic breeding soundness evaluation consists of:

- Physical examination of the animal.
- Examination of reproductive organs.
- Measurement of scrotal size.
- Semen evaluation.

In addition, the following tests or procedures may be included in a breeding soundness evaluation:

- Mating ability: Some assessment of the bull's desire (libido) and ability to breed a female in heat (termed serving capacity).
- Pelvic measurement.
- Trichomoniasis testing.

Physical Examination

The bull needs to be able to see, eat, smell, and move around to successfully breed his share of cows. Any factor that lowers the efficiency of these activities will have a negative effect on the bull's breeding ability.

A history of recent illness is also important since the semen sample may show evidence of testicular damage from a fever for several months after the illness. Spermatogenesis or the creation of sperm cells in a bull requires 45 to 60 days.

High fever, infections, and other physical problems can cause damage to the sperm creation process. It is important to keep this in mind when semen testing breeding bulls.

Eyes—A bull with poor vision is not only dangerous to handle but is usually dominated by other bulls to the point that his breeding effectiveness is reduced. Both eyes should be free from injuries or disease. Special care should be taken to examine eyes for early cancer eye growths. Old pinkeye scars that result in loss of vision may be reason to cull some bulls, especially in multiple sire groups.

Teeth and Mouth—Older bulls need to be examined for lost and severely worn teeth. Lump jaw (actinomycosis) is a chronic bone and soft tissue infection that is not responsive to treatment. This type of infection is much more serious than the simple "cheatgrass" type abscesses that drain and then completely heal up. Bulls with actinomycosis should be culled as soon as the condition is diagnosed.

Another infection that cattle are susceptible to is "wooden tongue." This is caused by bacteria that are present in the mouth of the animal. When rough feed is consumed, it can cause abrasions in the lining of the mouth that allow the bacteria to invade the soft tissue. The tongue and lymph nodes are often affected. The tongue suddenly becomes hard, swollen, and irritated.

Symptoms are cattle that drool excessive saliva and seem to be chewing softly. In advanced cases, the animal is unable to eat or drink and rapidly begins to lose weight. Treatments using iodine and tetracyclines