



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Reproduction Section

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Bull Management Before the Breeding Season

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To better understand management of bulls, the year can be divided into three seasons: (1) pre-breeding or conditioning, (2) breeding season, and (3) post-breeding season or rest and recuperation. While the length of each segment may vary from one operation to another, the basic requirements during the periods remain the same.

The conditioning period should last around 60 days. This timeframe allows bulls to acclimate to the new environment and diet, attain adequate body condition, and produce/store good quality semen. At the start of the conditioning period, the bull battery should be fairly well established (including acquisition of new bulls; see 421).

A producer should have determined bull needs for the upcoming breeding season and appraised the existing bull battery. Evaluation should include a breeding soundness exam by an accredited veterinarian (see 425), which assures the reproductive capacity and physical soundness of each bull. Additionally, an evaluation of a bull's libido (serving capacity) is also required for adequate breeding performance. The use of physically sound, high-libido fertile sires will result in a shorter breeding and calving season.

Bulls found to be unsatisfactory with the breeding soundness exam, and possibly those that are questionable, should be replaced. New bulls should be acquired at least 60 and preferably 90 days before the breeding season. This provides ample time for the new acquisitions to adjust to the feed and acclimate to the new environment (see 421).

During the conditioning period, bulls that will work together should be grouped so they can become familiar with each other and develop a social structure, particularly because social dominance highly influences

the reproductive performance of a bull. Older, larger bulls are usually dominant in a group. However, the dominant bull may not have the highest libido or the best breeding soundness score (see 425). The dominant bull will typically breed the most cows, or inhibit other bulls from breeding them. Therefore, if the dominant bull is infertile, the fertility of the herd will decrease regardless of the reproductive merit of the other bulls.

Newly acquired bulls as well as the carry-overs in the bull battery should be brought up to date in a complete health program with the balance of the herd. Insect control is especially critical for bulls. Lice and flies both find bulls a likely target for infestation.

Proper attention and care of the feet can prolong the productive life of a bull and can help ensure physical soundness during the breeding season. After an extended period of inactivity, a bull's feet may be long and misshapen. Hoof trimming should be done at the start of the conditioning period, so there is time for adequate regrowth, which acts as a cushion during the breeding process. Nevertheless, bulls with chronic feet problems should be discarded from the herd to prevent propagation of such trait to the offspring.

Bull Development

Perhaps the most critical factor for proper bull development is exercise. A bull during the breeding season might be equated to an athlete, since in most situations he travels several miles each day and maintains a high degree of physical activity. Physical fitness requires several weeks of conditioning. Bulls are by nature active and become more so as the weather warms before the breeding season.

If bulls are given ample area in pastures or lots, they will usually exercise themselves. In designing bull facilities, locate supplemental feeding and water areas as far apart as possible to stimulate exercise. For instance,

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