



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Reproduction Section

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Bull Management and Care in the Western U.S. During and After the Breeding Season

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A sound battery of breeding bulls is integral to the success of any cow-calf operation. Good management practices are important for these bulls both during the breeding season and afterwards in the down time of year.

In most cases, breeding bulls are only useful for 3 to 4 years. Bulls of advancing age have the potential of breeding their own daughters if the operation is raising its own replacement heifers. In addition, skin folds in the sheath area are larger in older bulls, which may increase the risk of trichomoniasis infection.

When older bulls are removed from the breeding battery and new bulls added, young bulls have a higher potential for breeding problems during the breeding season. This can translate into open cows, extended calving seasons, and lighter calves at weaning. Younger bulls may require a higher level of management, including an elevated level of nutrition (Parker, Mathis, and Hawkins 1999).

Bull management and care is an ongoing process. Most successful bull management programs include the following practices, both during and after the breeding season:

- Appraisal of breeding conditions such as pastures or paddocks.
- Assessment of social behavior and bull dominance within the battery.
- Bull-to-cow ratio.
- Evaluation of the body condition and nutritional level of bulls before, during, and after the breeding season.
- Breeding soundness exams, not only for fertility, but also disease potential.

Appraisal of Breeding Conditions

Breeding conditions can definitely determine the success of the breeding season. Included in the breeding conditions is how, when, and where cows and heifers will be bred. Pastures, fences, and working facilities should all be evaluated for any pitfalls that might occur. Managers of cattle being bred under range conditions will have to consider natural barriers, water and forage supplies, and how far the animals can scatter.

Constant monitoring during the breeding season will indicate how well the bulls are working and whether the cows are being covered. Note and incorporate any changes that need to be made before they are forgotten. Fences and natural barriers should be strong enough to limit encroachment by other bulls. This is especially true when trying to keep performance data on individual bulls and females.

Forage and water availability should be evaluated to determine if the location will adequately meet the nutritional requirements for a particular group of animals. For example, should a pasture continue to be used for first-calf heifers (females with first calf at side), or is it better suited for open heifers that are not nursing a calf? It may be too late to make immediate changes in the year this situation is realized. However, changes that will improve the situation should be noted and made for the following year.

Bull Dominance

Although cows do most of the “finding” of a mate, bulls need the freedom of movement to find “hot” cows. When bulls, especially young bulls, are turned into new environments, they naturally will make