

Don't Forget the Bulls

The first winter storm brings the reality of the season. It's important to remember to care for bulls during inclement weather.

For many the cows and calves head home, and then the calves are sorted for market. The busyness of it all is mind-boggling at times. The pens are stretched to the max, and there is not enough time to get every animal fed and watered on a normal schedule.

A quick sort often will move the bulls aside and put the cows and calves at center stage. Off in the distance, one can hear someone ask if the bulls have been fed.

The point being, bulls still are a very important part of a cow-calf enterprise.

In all honesty, way too many times bulls take a backseat once the breeding season is done. Just like cows, bulls need time to recover.

If the bulls can't hold up, why are they there in the first place? That question is a point of discussion. We all need to remember that many bulls are terminal bulls. In other words, they breed cows and sire calves that are designed to be feeder calves. These bulls often are purchased for high dollars, so the key to making the bulls affordable is years of use. A bull that can be depreciated out over four or five

breeding seasons is much better for the bottom line than a bull that only lasts two or three seasons.

The market calves will perform well in the feedlot and be aggressively sought after by feeder calf buyers. The majority of bulls are not intended to produce replacement heifers. If, in fact, the bull was intended to sire replacement heifers, he had better come in in reasonable shape. Regardless, the bulls have worked hard and need some recuperation.

The cow-calf management class that I teach at Dickinson State University is always fun, and listening to the students certainly brings insight into the beef business.

A former student once wrote, "After the breeding season, many producers would like to forget about their breeding bulls, and some do. They become a hassle because no one wants them in the way. How much easier it is to push them to the back 40 and worry about them next spring.

"Although it is apparent that breeding bulls do not require a lot of extra attention in the off-season, some care must be fulfilled to reduce costs for the next year. Most breeding commences in the spring or early summer and extends for two to three

more months. Even with a 60-day prebreeding conditioning period, this still leaves approximately seven months of post-breeding. These usually are in the fall and winter months.

"After the completion of the breeding season, old or crippled bulls should be sorted off and sold. Mature, healthy bulls won't require a lot of extra care, so they could go by themselves. This leaves the younger, thinner bulls to work with. These are the ones that should receive a little higher-quality feed through the winter to increase their years of productivity. Properly balanced nutrition, including minerals, should be available to assure optimum reproductive performance.

"Nutrition begins with adequate amounts of feed. For example, a 1,300-lb. bull needing to gain 1.5 lb. per day needs 26.1 lb. of dry matter. It would consist of 2 lb. (7.9%) of protein and 15.6 lb. (59.7%) of total digestible nutrients (TDN) or energy. A larger bull, say 1,900 lb., needs to gain .5 lb. per day. This bull would need 32.2 lb. of dry matter per day. To accomplish this, the bull needs 2.2 lb. (6.9%) of protein and 16.8 lb. (52%) of TDN or energy.

"Shelter also is an overlooked aspect. Testicles easily can be frozen in this part of the Midwest, so some

bedding and shelter are important. Remember that bulls constitute 50% of next year's calf crop. Therefore, wise management practices can reduce variable costs, which will result in greater overall revenue."

I couldn't have said it better or been any more right when he said that producers sometimes would like to forget about the bull inventory because bulls can be a pain. The key to bull management, like all other cattle management, is the willingness to address topics in a very timely manner rather than to wait until a crisis arises.

Bull care and nutrition need to start now, not next spring prior to bull turnout. Bulls need to be physically healthy, athletic in nature and conditioned for a vigorous marathon. In addition, they require approximately eight weeks for viable sperm cell development.

For bulls that are mismanaged and have their spermatogenic cycles disrupted, a minimum of two months is needed for them to start having a viable sperm supply for the proper conception of next year's calf crop.

Listen up: Don't forget about those bulls; keep them in sight and properly fed. **HW**