



PHOTOS BY MARTHA OSTENDORF MINTZ

# Winter Bull Management

by Heather Smith Thomas

**F**all and winter management of bulls is important for having them healthy and in top shape for the next breeding season.

Dr. Ram Kasimanickam, Washington State University department of veterinary clinical sciences, says any bull that has lost weight should be brought back to adequate condition: “Studies have shown that a body condition score of 5 is adequate for a breeding bull. Yearling bulls need special attention because they are still growing.”

Feed supplies and sources may vary from ranch to ranch as to what is economical to feed

as forage and/or concentrates or supplements. The main thing is to make sure young bulls have adequate nutrition to keep growing and to stay in adequate body condition.

“Bulls need proper levels of trace minerals and vitamins for good sperm production. Vitamins A and E, and selenium, copper, zinc and manganese serve as protectors and prevent damage to sperm from stress. Stress-damaged sperm will result in reduced fertility; even if fertilization occurs, the resultant embryo will fail to develop. Knowledge of soils and what they might lack will tell you which minerals need to be supplemented,” Kasimanickam

says. Proper supplementation will depend on the region and the individual ranch.

The vitamin-mineral program should be part of the year-round management and not just seasonal. Producers don’t need to do anything special for bulls but just keep them on the same program as the cows, regarding mineral and vitamin supplementation.

## Don't forget exercise

One aspect of bull management that is sometimes ignored is exercise. Bulls need exercise to stay fit.

“There are many ways to make sure they get enough exercise. Some producers put the feed and water at different ends of the pen or pasture, so bulls have to walk. They need to be fit before the next breeding season so they have adequate endurance and can cover their cows early in the season,” Kasimanickam says. You don’t want bulls too soft and fat — with no stamina — after their winter “vacation.” Bulls should not be underfed or overfed; they need optimum condition to have

enough ambition and stamina to cover the cows.

They do need to be fed a little extra during winter, however, to have enough energy to keep warm during cold weather. Weather severity and climate in each producer’s area will determine how much extra feed the bulls will need.

If bulls come out of the cow herd a little thin after breeding season, some producers tend to overfeed them when picking them back up in flesh again. “The fat layers around the scrotum insulate the testes and can interfere with proper thermo-regulation of the testes. The sperm parameters and sperm production will be adversely affected in overfed bulls. This is why lean-to-moderate body condition is better than over-fat bulls,” he says.

Avoiding overfeeding is also important for health reasons. “Too much grain in the diet can lead to acidosis and liver abscesses, or foot problems,” he says.

Also make sure feeds don’t contain endophyte-infected fescues or other plants that act as vasoconstrictors, which



**Bull Buying and Management**

## Pecking order



If a group of bulls will be spending the winter together, they soon have the pecking order figured out, and there’s not much fighting after that. To avoid injuries, put them all together on the same day or as soon as possible. This management strategy is actually easier on them — as they all fight one another and no one bull gets picked on. If you keep adding bulls to a group, the newcomers are ganged up on by the ones that are already there and may be run to exhaustion.

It can be detrimental to add bulls later, because any change upsets the whole social order. You may need to keep yearlings and new bulls separate for a while, especially if the yearlings need better feed than the older ones to regain weight while still growing. If you put them with older bulls later, usually the old bulls tend to leave the young ones alone. The young ones are more timid and don’t challenge the bigger bulls as aggressively as they would their peers. Also the young bulls are fairly agile and athletic and are good at getting out of the way of the older bulls, so they are less apt to get hurt. **HW**

interfere with circulation to the extremities. Cattle have been known to lose ears and tails and have foot problems during cold weather when eating certain feeds. "This interference with adequate blood circulation can also have an effect on the testicles and sperm production, affecting thermoregulation," says Kasimanickam.

#### **Protect from frostbite**

Windbreaks for the bulls are important. "During cold weather in winter, there can be adverse effect on the testicles if bulls can't get out of the wind. Scrotal frostbite adhesions may be temporary or permanent, depending on the severity of frostbite. This will hinder the bull's ability to raise or lower the testicles for proper thermoregulation, and this can dramatically and adversely affect sperm production and parameters," he explains.

If a bull has mild frostbite, there is good chance for recovery before the next breeding season. But according to Kasimanickam, if it's severe frostbite the bull may not recover and won't be fertile — and must be replaced.



Bulls need proper levels of trace minerals and vitamins for good sperm production.

"Prevention is best," he explains. "Make sure bulls have windbreaks and bedding. Some people pile up old hay and straw for bedding. Heat from fermentation in these piles will help the bull stay warmer in cold weather. Any bull that is exposed to severe cold weather may suffer frostbite unless he has some protection."

#### **Health program is also key**

It is also important to pay attention to vaccination programs,

and control internal parasites as well as lice and ticks.

"A sound health program is important," Kasimanickam says. "Most people have a pretty good program for the cow herd but sometimes the bulls are ignored. Don't wait until the last minute for vaccinations, since bulls need enough time to build immunity."

Any new bull should come from a reputable source and should have vaccination records. "Usually bulls are vaccinated before being sold, but if they

haven't been vaccinated, this should be done in a timely manner before the next breeding season," he says.

Unless they are young virgin bulls, they should also be tested for trichomoniasis before breeding season. Every bull should have a breeding soundness exam. Even if the bull was fine last year, there may be changes due to age, injury or infection that may affect fertility for the next breeding season. **HW**