



PHOTO BY MICHELLE COX

Feeding to Breeding

Prepare bulls to transition to breeding season.

by Heather Smith Thomas

The hardest time for a young bull is when he's turned out with the cows for his first breeding season after being well fed all winter. Most bulls are raised in unnatural conditions. After weaning, they are confined and fed concentrate feeds and pushed for fast growth. Many young bulls have gone through a bull test/feeding program to measure rate of gain and feed efficiency and are overly fat.

Although most stockmen know that fat is unhealthy for a bull, they still tend to buy the biggest, best-looking animals, and many breeders keep overfeeding them because it's harder to sell a bull that wasn't pushed for faster gain. If a young bull isn't fat, many buyers think there must be something wrong with him.

Ration change

Overfat bulls always need to be "let down" slowly, and some of them never do make the transition very well if they've been on "hot" rations for fast growth. They may not be as fertile if they

have too much fat in the scrotum and may not hold up; hot rations can cause permanent damage to their feet. Bulls must be athletic and must have the ability to stay sound, with the endurance to cover a lot of territory and a lot of cows; overfeeding can permanently impair that ability.

Even the bulls that have been developed on "growing rations" are carrying more flesh than bulls raised on grass or wintered on hay. It can be a major adjustment for any over-conditioned bull when he's turned out with cows. Some young bulls can't handle the sudden increase in exercise and the decrease in nutrition and fall apart quickly. After experiencing disappointment with over-fat young bulls, many stockmen have become more selective about the seedstock producers they patronize — trying to find a breeder who offers bulls in better working condition.

It also pays to have a good transitioning program after the bull is brought home. How successful this might be will depend on how long the producer

has him before he goes out with cows. Some ranchers buy bulls in the fall or winter and give the bull plenty of time to adjust to his new environment. Others bring the bulls home just a few days or weeks before turnout.

Working bulls

Some seedstock producers offer a feeding or wintering program; even if the bulls are sold in the fall, the breeder keeps and feeds them — delivering them closer to breeding season. This arrangement works well for producers if the bulls are properly transitioned. The producers don't have to worry about keeping and feeding extra bulls until turnout. They rely on the breeder to have the bulls in ideal working condition at the time of delivery.

This situation works for Ross Middlemist at Dixon, Mont. He's purchased bulls for many years from the same seedstock breeder. "The bulls always look like they're ready to go to work when they get here and I don't think they're getting any grain at that point," Middlemist says. "We just keep them in a group on good hay until turnout."

Middlemist says the bulls look good when they are brought back in after breeding season. Their good appearance is an indication that they were conditioned properly. Even if they were pushed for fast growth, they need some time to taper off from that ration. Most bulls will not be getting anything but forage once they reach the ranch where they'll be working, so they need to have been "weaned off" grain well ahead of delivery to their new home.

Ross Goddard runs 800 cows in the Lemhi Valley near Salmon, Idaho, and uses a bull for every 20 cows. He buys eight to 10 new bulls each year and tries to know the breeder and to know what the bulls have been fed.

"All of the breeders use a certain amount of grain or concentrate because they have to, to get the bulls big enough soon enough, since almost everyone is selling yearling bulls," Goddard says. "You have to know how much they've been feeding the bulls, and trust their judgment."

Goddard says when the bulls are delivered, if they've been on grain, he will keep them on a small amount of grain concentrate until they go out. They lose weight, and some of them lose a lot of weight, and this loss can be hard on them for the next year. Goddard tries to keep most of his yearling bulls on home pastures rather than range, since range terrain in this country is steep and rocky, and if young bulls go up on the mountain, they really fall apart.

"The next year, as 2-year-olds, they're in better working shape and we don't feed them any type of grain or concentrate until about two months before the breeding season," Goddard says. "We feed all our bulls 3 to 4 lb. of grain or a pellet ahead of the breeding season, along with their hay to build them back up and keep them going. We feed them alfalfa or a good mixed hay through the winter. We also keep a good mineral package in front of them all the time they are home."

His bulls are turned out with cows at the end of April. Even

Yearlings need more pampering

Even though yearlings work well, they are still growing and immature.

"Once they go out and breed the first year, the next year they're still not mature," Goddard says. They are not at their peak until age 3. He says it takes them a little longer to reach that peak if they've been used hard as yearlings. This usage has to be taken into consideration when managing them after their first breeding season.

"You have to give them an extra chance," he says. "When we check them ahead of breeding season the next year we feed them well, and push them a little, but it still takes them quite a while to make up for the hard use the first year," he says. There are tradeoffs when producers use yearlings, but if they are lucky, they get more years out of them.

It pays to pull yearling bulls out of the herd early (right after breeding season rather than keeping them with the cows all summer and fall) to give them a break—so they won't keep losing weight—and let them grow up some more before the next season. "When you bring them home you need to feed them well. If they can't be out on green pasture, let them have free choice high quality hay," he says. If you can keep their nutritional level high enough to allow them to regain the weight they lost and keep growing, they will do better the next year.

"I do like using yearlings," says Goddard. "I bought a couple 2-year-olds one year and they didn't hold up as well as the yearlings. I think they were too heavy and over-fat; then



they went out and pushed themselves too hard and couldn't quite handle it as well."

He says he felt they needed to get in working condition at a younger age instead of having to do it when they had more body weight.

"There's a high turnover in yearling bulls, however. It's just like heifers. They don't all make it. You have to realize this will happen and allow for it," he says. They have more chance, however, if given time to transition smoothly from feeding to breeding. **HW**

though Goddard generally buys his bulls in the fall or late winter, the breeder usually holds the bulls and feeds them until late March or early April.

"So the yearling bulls will be here only about a month before turnout," Goddard says. "Most people have them on a corn ration, so we'll keep them on a little corn for a while, but not as heavy a ration, so they won't lose weight right off the bat, because as soon as they hit the cow herd they are running the weight off."

He keeps the bulls before turnout in a small pasture rather than a pen, so they get used to being in a larger area. They have more room for exercise to get their muscles in better shape for working.

"If I don't have a pasture for them I put them in one of my bigger pens that's drier, so their feet don't get soft," Goddard says.

The main thing about buying bulls is to make sure they aren't too fat. Optimum condition for a young bull will also depend on the terrain in which he'll be working. If the cattle will be out in the hills, a rancher should make sure the bull is conditioned for that and has had more exercise. It also helps if the rancher can feed the bulls in an area where they've got to climb a hill or travel between feed and water. Exercise is very important. It really helps if the bulls are in a more natural environment.

Health program

A good vaccination program is essential for new bulls in order to have them immunized against all the disease they might encounter in their new home. Some breeders will have the bulls vaccinated before they are delivered; in other situations they must be vaccinated when they arrive. Goddard says the bulls he buys are Trichomoniasis tested and semen checked, with a breeding soundness exam, but he generally vaccinates them upon delivery with vaccines recommended by his local vet.

"We brand them and give them all the vaccines we want them to have in this area," he says. "I usually consult the vet on what we need to give them because it can change; there are sometimes newer, better vaccines available." **HW**