Transitioning Young Bulls from Feeding to Breeding

Learn how body condition plays an important role for your bull when breeding season comes around and what to avoid.

by ***Heather Smith Thomas***

When marketing young bulls as yearlings, many times producers push them to be large enough and mature enough to breed cows at a young age. Some young bulls have also gone through a bull test or feeding program to measure rate of gain and feed efficiency and are fat by the time they finish these programs and go through a sale.

Ultimately, this body condition can lead to a tough adjustment when they are turned out with cows after being well-fed all winter. Some cannot handle the sudden increase in exercise and decrease in nutrition when they go out with cows and fall apart. It pays to have a good transitioning program after you raise a bull or bring one home. Buying bulls in the fall or winter allows them time to adjust to a new environment.

Transitioning to breeding

John Kastelic, DVM, Ph.D, Cattle Reproductive Health, Department of Production Animal Health, University of Calgary, has done extensive research on bulls and says that in the past with beef bulls, breeders focused on nutrition after weaning. "Studies showed that if you feed high-energy diets after weaning, bulls have rapid weight gain but this creates excessive fat in the scrotum, reduction in semen quality, more risk for laminitis/founder, liver abscesses, rumenitis, etc. Feeding young bulls that much energy is counterproductive."

Producers now recognize that a bull should be fed for a long life of breeding rather than fed like a steer destined for slaughter.

"People used to think that if a bull is not fat, he must be a hard keeper or poor doer," Kastelic says. "Sale bulls were always fat, but producers thought they could just take them home and put them on a diet and then they'd be in breeding shape. Unfortunately, some of the damage in overfat young bulls can be permanent."

Even though most seedstock producers realize this problem, many bulls are still overfed.

"If bulls are fed post-weaning on a mostly forage diet, those with genetic potential for rapid and efficient gain will still gain fastest although the difference between the top and bottom is smaller," Kastelic says. "You can still do a feed test, but on a forage-based ration with a modest amount of grain, and still identify the top-performing bulls. There is no excuse to push them with a feedlot ration."

Kastelic also adds it is wise to have bulls in a large area for exercise prior to turning them out in large pastures with cows.

"They should be kept in a large lot where they have to walk from feed to water. All too often the producer brings home an expensive bull and puts him in a small pen to protect him from injury, and when the bull goes out to work, he's not ready for it."

Avoid buying fat bulls

Many bulls purchased at bull sales have been overfed to some degree and confined during their growing months and have to suddenly adjust to being on pasture and to breeding cows. Even if they have not been overfed to the point of permanent damage, they still need a little time to make the transition.

"The first step is to buy bulls with good frame and growth potential, but not too fat," Kastelic says. "They need to be in reasonable condition, however, since bulls lose a lot of weight their first breeding season — especially on extensive range pastures where they have to travel — they will easily drop 200 pounds or more. You don't want them going out thin, especially if they are breeding cows in the spring. That early grass looks lush and green but has high water content and not enough dry matter. Cattle may have fire-hose diarrhea from washy feed. Sending bulls out in good condition — not too thin and not too fat — is best, along with having them on a forage-based diet before turnout. A hay or silage-based diet with maybe just a little grain to maintain condition works well."

It is well known that any time you transport a bull there is stress put on the animal. With any kind of stress there will be abnormal sperm in about 10 days. It may take three to six weeks for semen to get back to normal, depending on how stressed the bull was and how severe the changes are. He needs plenty of time not only for biosecurity issues (keeping him apart from other bulls and cattle for a few weeks) but also for transition. Some ranchers like to get their new bulls in the fall to let them adjust to the new environment and pecking order within a group of bulls before they are all turned out the next spring.

"Inevitably when you transport a bull there will be some stress, and stress suppresses the luteinizing hormone," Kastelic says. "It drops, taking testosterone down with it. With relocation there will always be some stress and decrease in semen quality. How long the decrease in quality persists will depend on how anxious and stressed the bull is, how long the trip, etc. If you bring home a yearling bull and stick him in a pen with mature bulls and he gets beat up, he may have issues with semen quality for 6 weeks or more."

Make sure vaccinations are up to date, along with parasite control, before you send bulls out. There are advantages to bringing the bull home a few weeks or months before breeding season, rather than having the breeder keep and feed the bull for later delivery. If the bull has a chance to adjust to your environment, he will usually do better than if he is dropped off at the breeding pasture or a few days before turnout. "From a biosecurity perspective, bring him home and have him isolated for a few weeks or a month, and give him time to transition," Kastelic says. HW