



PHOTO BY CODI VALLERY-MILLS

To Make Your Breeding Season Successful, The Work Starts Now

A checklist for effective bull management.

by Codi Vallery-Mills

The seedstock you choose to put in your pasture every breeding season has the greatest potential to influence your herd's genetics and calf characteristics and a bull's nutrition can be a limiting factor on how well that potential is tapped.

With the 2010 winter and spring bull sales just days away now is the time to begin planning your herd sire needs and management practices to assure an efficient breeding season.

Speaking at the Range Beef Cow Symposium in Casper, Wyo., Dec. 5, Beef Extension Specialist

Julie Walker of South Dakota's West River Ag Center gave bull nutrition reminders to cow-calf operators.

First, it is important to remember that puberty equals fertility. A common measurement of puberty is in a bull's scrotal circumference. Most bulls that have a circumference between 27-29 centimeters (cm) will have reached puberty. Walker says only 35% of bulls reach maturity at 12 months, 60% at 14 months and 95% at 16 months.

Scrotal circumference is relative to daily sperm production; the larger scrotal circumference bulls (non-fatty types) will have large sperm production. Their sons will generally also have big scrotums and it has been proven in research that their daughters will often reach puberty earlier.

Nutritional requirements and how those needs are met will influence how fast those bulls reach maturity. For pre-weaned beef calves it is adequate to leave calves at dam's side and on forage. Once calves are weaned Walker recommends moderate rates of gain instead of high rates of gain. She says there is no magic feed meridian and there are several ration variations to choose from, but the key is to develop a ration that meets the desired animal performance without over- or under-developing the bull, which can have negative impacts on semen quality and quantity.

Prior to breeding season Walker gives these tips:

- 1) Have a plan of which bulls will be together in the pasture by observing them in the pen. "This is when you let them pick their social structure," Walker says.
- 2) Make sure bulls are given exercise. Whether they are wintered in a pasture or on dry lot, bulls need a reason to get up and move. Make sure they are getting daily movement by walking to water or feed. Exercise is known to increase libido and will keep the bulls physically fit and ready for breeding.
- 3) Bulls entering into breeding season should be at a body condition score (BCS) of 6. Bulls should be gaining weight and maintaining condition 120 days before breeding.

Walker also advises that cattlemen buying bulls from seedstock producers need to have a conversation about what they are feeding because an upset in diet can affect sperm quality and quantity. If bulls are highly fitted, their diet should be brought down 10% each week to effectively incorporate them on to grass.

Pasture time

It's breeding season, your bulls are in top shape and are ready to go pasture to join the cow herd. Now what?

Walker says producers need to consider the male-to-female ratio. A good rule of thumb is to place the same number of females as the same number of months in age the bull is to each bull. For an 18-month-old bull it would then be understood that he would be expected to service 18 females.

Once the bulls are divided into their pastures observe them in action. Walker recommends checking in on the bulls between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. This is when the majority of cows are in heat and bulls will be most active. Producers should observe bulls for their level of interest and efficiency. "It is worth the time to make sure they are okay and doing their job," Walker says.

During breeding season bulls will be able to eat the same diet as the cows, which is most often a forage-based diet with mineral and protein pack supplements.

After breeding, bulls should be visually appraised and placed into three groups: 1) mature bulls in good condition, 2) growing bulls and thin bulls, and 3) salvage bulls that will be marketed.

For salvage bulls Walker recommends giving a little extra care, helping them reach an average daily gain of 3-5 lb., before selling.

Walker says that the semen quality of a bull can change over time as several factors include weather, nutrition and injury can affect production. It is important for producers to conduct annual bull soundness exams through a veterinarian to ensure their bulls have viable semen. **HW**

Editor's Note: Originally published in The Cattle Business Weekly, reprinted with permission.

Herd sire checklist

Before bulls are turned out to pasture with the females make sure these three things are done:

- ✓ Bulls are in a body condition score between 5.5-6.
- ✓ Bulls have been slowly converted to predominant forage-based diet.
- ✓ Bulls have had breeding soundness exams conducted.

Once the bulls have been turned out to pasture you should:

- ✓ Check on them within the first 48 hours of delivering to pasture to make sure they are showing interest in the females.
- ✓ Plan routine check-in times to make sure they are not injured.
- ✓ Provide them and the cow herd a mineral/salt block supplement.

Breeding season is over, now you:

- ✓ Bring the bulls home and divide them into three groups based upon their body condition scores and age.
- ✓ Continue a forage-based diet with a supplement of protein to get body condition scores back up. **HW**