



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Reproduction Section

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Purchasing and Managing Young Bulls

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Purchasing young bull calves has become an economic reality in the beef industry. Most breeders prefer selling young bulls to avoid the costs of another year of feed and management. In many cases, the 2-year-old bulls available are those that did not sell the previous year and, as a group, are lower performing animals. A breeder will have more young bulls available than 2-year-olds, which gives buyers more opportunities to select the better performance bulls. The exception may be herds where only older bulls are sold. Fewer performance test results are available for young calves, however, so less is known about the genetics of their growth rate and the buyer is more at risk.

Younger bulls usually cost less and have less invested in their development. Young bulls are also the best management decision available to control trichomoniasis. Older bulls are often carriers of the organism, and replacing them with younger bulls removes that source of the disease.

The breeding ability of bulls usually is at its highest between 1 1/2 and 2 1/2 years of age and declines after 5 or 6 years of age. Often an extra calf crop can be sired by using younger bulls as yearlings. The new owner must grow out young bulls in a satisfactory manner, however. The need for proper growth and development still exists and continues after the breeding season.

Selecting Young Herd Bulls

Before selecting an individual bull, cattle producers should first determine which breed or breeds will influence their cow herd. The choice of breeds should be based on a long-range plan developed by matching breed strengths to production goals. Individual bull comparison should be done within breed. This avoids confusion caused by differences between individual performance and breed characteristics.

The next decision is which herds will provide the required genetics via bulls. This should be based on both the herd genetic background and the breeders' reputation. Finally, the buyer must make selections among available calves.

The best tool available to evaluate the breeding value of a bull is Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs). Read CL1037, *Using National Sire Summaries to Improve Selection Skills*, for more details on EPDs. Most breeders can obtain this information through their breed associations. For EPDs to be useful, buyers must first determine their production goals. For example, is the goal to increase weaning or yearling weights, increase maternal milk, or increase calving ease? The selection then should emphasize those traits most related to the breeding goals of the rancher.

Buyers choose bulls based on their expected ability to improve a particular area of production. One bull cannot have the same impact on all cows within a herd. It is therefore the buyer's responsibility to match the bull calves they select to their cow breeding objectives.

Breeders should have the opportunity to collect growth data on yearling bulls through a test station, on-ranch test, or other programs. However, weaned bulls will not have this data available. Consequently, the accuracy of EPDs on young bulls is relatively low, which indicates that the value of the EPD might change as other records are added in the calculation. Conversely, younger bulls have progeny a year earlier, and the producer can evaluate performance much sooner.

Although EPDs on young bulls should be evaluated with caution, a buyer can use EPDs to group potential sires and then select an individual(s) from the group of bulls on visual evaluation. EPDs are used to compare bulls within the breed and are not intended to compare bulls between breeds.