



# Cattle Producer's Handbook

Reproduction Section

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## Identifying the Functional Bull: Bull Soundness and Management

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Evaluating breeding soundness of bulls is often neglected as a management practice. Producers may tend to believe that bulls in the bull battery for a year or more are of sound breeding value for the rest of their life. They may also feel that new bulls are sound breeders simply because of some vague or implied guarantee by the seller to replace infertile bulls. Unfortunately, neither idea may be correct. Bulls that do not settle their share of cows early in the breeding season are contributing to reproductive inefficiency. This can be just as costly as dead calves, although much less dramatic.

Bulls are selected for their genetic potential to improve the cow herd. It is economically important that all bulls are fertile. A breeding soundness examination performed yearly on each bull is the best way to predict that the producer will get his money's worth from his bull battery.

A basic breeding soundness evaluation consists of:

- Physical examination of the animal.
- Examination of reproductive organs.
- Measurement of scrotal size.
- Semen evaluation.

In addition, the following tests or procedures may be included in a breeding soundness evaluation:

- Mating ability: Some assessment of the bull's desire (libido) and ability to breed a female in heat (termed serving capacity).
- Pelvic measurement.
- Trichomoniasis testing.

### Physical Examination

The bull needs to be able to see, eat, smell, and move around to successfully breed his share of cows. Any factor that lowers the efficiency of these activities will have a negative effect on the bull's breeding ability. A history of recent illness is also important since the semen

sample may show evidence of testicular damage from a fever for several months after the illness.

**Eyes**—A bull with poor vision is not only dangerous to handle but is usually dominated by other bulls to the point that his breeding effectiveness is reduced. Both eyes should be free from injuries or disease. Special care should be taken to examine eyes for early cancer eye growths. Old pinkeye scars that result in loss of vision may be reason to cull some bulls, especially in multiple sire groups.

**Teeth and Mouth**—Older bulls need to be examined for lost and severely worn teeth. Lump jaw (Actinomyces) is a chronic bone and soft tissue infection that is not responsive to treatment. This type of infection is much more serious than the simple "cheatgrass" type abscesses that drain and then completely heal up. Bulls with Actinomyces should be culled as soon as the condition is diagnosed.

**Body Condition**—Ranchers often disagree about what is the correct body condition for a breeding bull. Bulls should have enough condition to be strong with some reserves of energy in the form of fat. The required amount of condition will vary with age, kind of range, length of the breeding season, and the number of cows per bull. A body condition score of 7 is desirable for range bulls entering the breeding season.

**Feet and Legs**—Structural soundness of the feet and legs is paramount if the bull is to travel and mount females in heat. A bull that is either sore or crippled will not be able to perform under range conditions.

Structural defects of the feet and legs should be discriminated against during the breeding soundness evaluation. Some young bulls may have been foundered to some degree in their growing phase. The foundered condition may be fully expressed during the breeding season, causing the bull to go lame and reducing