



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Reproduction Section

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Bull Management and Care in the Western U.S. During and After the Breeding Season

*William A. Zollinger, Gary Farnsworth, and Randy White
Oregon State University*

Cows and heifers conceiving early in the breeding season are the individuals that produce red meat most economically. Bull management affects early breeding season performance particularly when young bulls are involved.

Young bulls have a greater genetic potential for improvement of the cow herd than do older bulls. However, young bulls have a higher potential for breeding problems during the breeding season. These translate into open cows, extended calving seasons, and lighter calves at weaning. Therefore, proper care and management of bulls is paramount to getting cows and heifers bred efficiently.

Bull management and care is an ongoing process. Most successful bull management programs include the following both during and after the breeding season:

- Evaluation of breeding system and facilities,
- Social behavior and bull dominance,
- Bull power (cow/bull ratio),
- Post breeding nutrition (especially yearling bulls),
- Breeding soundness exams, and
- Disease risk post breeding.

Evaluation of Breeding System and Facilities

The ranch breeding system and facilities help to determine the success of the breeding season. Included in the breeding system is how and where cows and heifers will be bred as well as to what bull(s) they will be exposed. Included in the facilities are fences, including natural barriers, water and forage supplies, and corrals and working areas.

An evaluation during the breeding season will indicate how well the breeding system and facilities actually

work. Note and incorporate any changes that need to be made before they are forgotten. Fences and natural barriers should be strong enough to limit encroachment by other bulls. This is especially true when trying to keep performance data on individual bulls and females.

Forage and water availability should be evaluated to determine if the location will adequately meet the nutritional requirements for a particular group of animals. For example, should a pasture continue to be used for first-calf heifers (females with first calf at side) or is it better suited for open heifers that are not nursing a calf? It may be too late to make immediate changes. However, changes that will improve the situation should be noted and made for the following year.

Social Behavior and Bull Dominance

Although cows do most of the “finding” of a mate, bulls need the freedom of movement to find and mate with cows. When bulls, especially young bulls, are turned into new environments, they make several adjustments. The bulls may take several days to acclimate themselves to their new environment.

Studies at Clay Center, Nebraska, evaluating sexual behavior of bulls while on pasture, indicated that yearling beef bulls must undergo both a “learning process” and acclimation to their environment before exhibiting sexual behavior. Young beef bulls exhibit more sexual activity including mounting and achieving at least one service while in groups of three or more. Large single sire breeding pastures with yearling bulls may negatively impact early season matings and conceptions.

Social dominance or aggressive behavior by some bulls can influence the performance of less dominant bulls and limit mating desire, conception rate, and num-