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Bull Power

Horsepower is the measure of engine or motor power output, something that is a standard that most everyone understands. Today's title of "Bull Power" may leave more subjectivity on the table. We might venture into discussion of phenotypic three dimensionality and muscle expression. We could dive into genotypic excellence indicated by pedigree, EPDs and genomic testing. Both good things to discuss, but my focus today is more on having enough "bull power" to cover and successfully breed cows.

Breeding season has started for those late winter calving herds and the typical turn-out time for most pasture leases is here. A good goal for the breeding season is to get cows to breed early resulting in more calves being born earlier in the calving season. This shorter breeding and subsequent calving season allow for more older calves at weaning, which means more pounds of weaning weight. The typical beef calf gains about two pounds per day while nursing their mothers, which translates into about forty more pounds of weaned calf per estrus cycle.

Sounds simple right? Many factors play into this early conception like; postpartum interval, nutrition, health and today's focus - having an adequate number of bulls to get cows serviced. After bulls have successfully passed a breeding soundness exam, the old rule of thumb is that they can cover one female per month of age at turnout. Depending on which research is referenced, this ratio is an increasing scale up to 35-60 cows for a mature bull.

Looking at an example, a fifteen-month-old bull should be expected to cover fifteen heifers. If there are thirty heifers to breed in the group, two fifteen-month-old bulls should be utilized. Multiple factors play into this number such as synchronization or natural heats, single or multiple bull pastures, AI prior to natural service, size and topography of pasture, etc... Single bull pastures can make parentage easier, but can lead to fewer early bred cows, especially if bull injury or other problems occur.

Bulls on average can be utilized for five to six years, but there is no reason why they can't continue to service cows past that age point. The older bulls get, the more likely there will be for physical breakdowns that can cause open or late calving cows. Speaking from experience, a sore footed bull can extend your calving window and yield more open cows! Keep an eye on bulls of any age to make sure they are performing duties and watch cows for returning heats to indicate any potential issues before pregnancy, checking time and finding open cows.

Here are a few final thoughts on bull power to consider. Every situation is different but keen observation can go a long way in avoiding problems.

- A breeding soundness exam must be performed on all bulls prior to the breeding season.
- Monitor virgin bulls for mounting activity. Breeding is a learned behavior. As bulls get older, they have fewer false mounts and higher pregnancy rates compared to younger bulls.
- A pecking order amongst the bulls must be established before the breeding season. Turning out a new bull in a multi-bull pasture can cause a reproductive wreck.
- Rotating bulls can help reduce any potential fatigue and/or breeding issues.

The K-State publication ["Why Aren't My Cows Pregnant?" MF-3585](#) looks at this topic and other factors associated with avoiding open cows.