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Post Breeding Season Bull Management

In a past conversation with a good friend, we shared the challenges of dealing with breeding bulls in the off season. Bulls are an important part of the cowherd, but they do need to be managed when not actively servicing cows. Fortunately, bulls do not require intense management during the post breeding season period, so planning will ensure they are ready for service when needed.

In most spring calving herds, the breeding season begins in the spring or early summer. Maintaining a 60- to 90-day breeding season can be one of the most important management tools for cow-calf producers. A uniform, heavier, and more valuable calf crop is the reason that the bulls get pulled off the cowherd. After breeding season bulls can sometimes become an unwanted guest that producers would like to forget about for the remainder of the year.

Goals for the post breeding season window include the following principles. Keep feed costs at a practical minimum and target maintaining bulls in moderate condition. Feed to support continued growth of young bulls. Minimize the chance of injuries by maintaining bulls in larger bull pastures or lots where hierarchical dominance can be established safely. Make sure bulls are fertile and fit for the next breeding season turn out. Market any bulls with issues during the past breeding season.

To accomplish these goals producers should sort and appraise the bulls following the breeding season. Mature herd sires, in good condition, should be grouped together on pasture. The second group should include young bulls that still have a requirement for growth and bulls that are thin or need special care. Finally, producers should identify and cull the bulls that are old, crippled, inferior breeders, or have poor genetics.

All bulls should have access to a vitamin and mineral mix, like what is been given to the cow herd at that time. Mature bulls in good condition need access to around 2% of their body weight in dry forage per day to maintain. Whereas the yearlings and thin bulls should have access to higher-quality pasture, hay, or silage to increase body condition. If space and feed is available, the thin conditioned cull bulls may take advantage of some compensatory weight gain.

Bulls should be de-wormed and vaccinated on the same herd health program as the cow herd. If a bull's fertility has been questioned, it is a good idea to have a breeding soundness exam conducted after pulling bulls. This can save the expense of carrying an infertile bull into an upcoming breeding season.

Keep in mind that it is not a sign of poor management or bad genetics if a bull loses body condition during the breeding season. The good breeding bulls are active and hardworking, which can lead to some condition loss. However, if they cannot gain body condition while they are not working and grazing moderate to high-quality forage, their female progeny may not be able to either. These are good candidates for culling as well.