With genomic-enhanced expected progeny differences (EPDs) available, it is tempting to question the need for central bull tests. Scott Sell, director of the Edisto Forage Bull Test, puts a stop to that kind of thinking in a hurry.

“They are still the only place where you can actually see what two bulls do in the same environment and nutritional setting,” he explains.

He is also adamant about the advantages of a forage rather than a grain test, noting, “This is the way bulls will be fed on 95% of the farms that buy them.”

Consignor and Angus breeder Dixon Shealy agrees. “I haven’t come across anybody who raises bulls like the average commercial cattlemen. The forage test is as close as we can get.”

“Bulls usually lose weight after they come off a grain test. Here they are ready to rock and roll when they leave,” adds Gillian Tuttle, cow-calf manager for the Edisto Research and Education Center (EREC), home of the Blackville, S.C., bull test.

Also, a forage test is a prime place to test the working structure of a young bull, Sell says. “The bulls have to get out and walk. Here we have a little bit of all of it — rock, sand, gumbo. With a grain test, all they have to do is walk to the trough.”

When they leave the test facility at almost 2 years of age, they are ready to breed cows, he adds.

The bulls stay at EREC for almost a year. The test is open to bulls born from Dec. 1 through March 31. They come in the Monday after Thanksgiving, then go on test Dec. 1. The bulls that are eligible for the sale and not returned to their owner’s farm leave at sale time on the second Saturday in October.

“The actual test length is 168 days,” Sell says. “That is 56 days longer than most grain tests.” Like a grain test, however, they are weighed every 28 days.

While some question the bulls’ ability to express their genetic gain potential on forage, Sell says, “You
may not see an average daily gain (ADG) of 5.5 pounds (lb.), but you will see the differences.”

He says the actual gain varies widely depending on the forage and growing conditions. In the winter, when the bulls are grazing small-grain forages, they can gain 4.0 pounds (lb.) per day. In the heat of late spring, that drops. Overall, he says, they average around a 2.5-lb. ADG.

That suits Shealy, the Newberry, S.C., consignor, just fine.

“We have an on-farm test, and we don’t push our bulls,” he says. “They average 2.5 pounds a day, too.”

The economics of the test also appeal to him. Farm manager for his family’s Black Grove Farm, last year was the first year Shealy sent bulls to the test. The total charges, including sale charges, were $680. The total bill for the 2013 test will be between $750 and $800.

Shealy opted to bring home five of the seven bulls the farm consigned to sell them by private treaty. Through the end of the
actual test the end of May, his charges will probably be a little more than $400.

“We contract out our on-farm test,” he says. “The Edisto test can grow out our bulls for a third less. With our bulls on contract, I have to go up and weigh them every 28 days and keep up with the paperwork. Sending animals to Edisto, we know they are going to have good grass and we don’t have to pay for grain.”

For the producers who do sell through the sale, there is generally a good return on investment. Sale averages for the last five years have been between $2,500 and $3,000.

Shealy also appreciates Sell’s efforts to keep the consignors informed. In addition to the 28-day weights, Sell sends a report every two weeks describing the forage conditions and anything else he thinks the consignors might want to know. “It keeps you really feeling involved.”

He adds, “Edisto gives us an objective test, and we’re able to compare the bulls we’re breeding to bulls from other breeders. We’re satisfied. Next year we are going to send all our eligible bulls.”

Editor’s Note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlewoman from Cuthbert, Ga.