

# A Balancing Act

BY ERIC GRANT

If you're like most cattle producers, one of the biggest investments you make each year is in bulls, especially yearling bulls. It doesn't matter whether you buy bulls or produce them yourself, the risks are always high. Protecting your investment and ensuring your bulls are in top-notch physical condition when breeding season begins are high priorities.

Cody Yeager, who annually develops about 500 bulls of several breeds at Yeager's C-Bar, Vaughn, Mont., and Leo McDonnell, owner of the world-famous Midland Bull Test of Columbus, Mont., agree that effective bull conditioning begins with a solid herd health program long before calves are weaned.

"We try to get our customers to precondition their calves before they bring them in," Yeager says. He admonishes producers to administer proper vaccinations to bull calves while they're still on their mothers. Once calves are weaned, teach them to eat from a bunk and to drink from a tank or trough. This will ensure bulls continue on an adequate plane of gain and nutrition once you place them in a confined feeding situation for three or four months before yearling age.

A good preweaning vaccination program should provide protection against infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD), parainfluenza-3 (PI<sub>3</sub>), bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV) and clostridium. Once weaned, calves should receive a booster shot.

All bull calves also should be dewormed once you pull them off the pasture. Experts recommend using a long-acting parasiticide, such as Dectomax® or Ivomec®, which cleans up internal worms but also provides long-term protection against lice. Remember, if your calves are loaded with parasites, they won't gain as well as they should, and they might have a higher



Conditioning bulls for breeding season begins with a good vaccination program before they are ever weaned.

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frequency of sickness if worms and other parasites go unchecked.

Yeager says they like to use "a good dewormer on the bulls once they arrive here to clean them up and get them on feed a little quicker."

McDonnell likes to follow up with booster shots in January, a couple of months after they're weaned. "We also give them foot-rot vaccine at that time to protect their feet," he says. "Then we worm the bulls a week or so before the sale."

## Don't overdo energy

When you look at feeding rations, avoid giving your bulls too much energy through mixes that contain too much grain. Feeding "hot rations" makes young bulls too fat and can cause hoof or joint problems.

The best rations depend heavily on high-quality roughages, such as hay or alfalfa. If balanced correctly with grains, you can ensure your bulls develop properly, adding optimum muscle and skeletal growth without the excess fat.

"The most important thing is to avoid rations that are too high in energy," McDonnell adds. "A lot of these bull-development feeds out there today really concern me. They can get your bulls to gain, but I think you can compromise the soundness of some of these bulls. Some of the feeds are just too rich."

Bull calves should gain between 3 and 3.3 pounds (lb.)/day for the 100-plus days prior to when they become yearlings.

Yeager feeds his bulls a high-roughage ration consisting mostly of alfalfa, grass hay and oats. "We don't try to push them too hard," he says. "We want to get their rumens stretched out and functioning, but we want to prevent them from getting too fat and avoid ruining their feet

by feeding them too hot of a ration. The biggest thing is to get them grown up enough so they can go out and breed once breeding season begins."

McDonnell emphasizes high-quality roughages in hay or silage and moderate energy sources, such as whole oats or corn. "We try to get as much growth as we can with high-quality roughage," he says.

Watch out for feeding overprocessed grains, McDonnell warns. "If your grain is overprocessed and too refined, your bulls will have surges of energy levels when they are digesting it. If your grain is a coarser grind, you'll get a steadier energy release."

## Additional mineral needs

Minerals — especially trace minerals — are especially important for bull calves



The extra care you've given your yearling bulls to prepare them for their first breeding season shouldn't stop at turnout.

during the early phases of the development period. "We have our own mineral pellet," McDonnell says. "When the bulls first come in, we run a hot chelated mineral program for the first six weeks, then we'll start phasing that out to a regular mineral."

McDonnell uses mineral supplements that include high levels of zinc and magnesium, which are good for healthy feet and joints, as well as high levels of vitamins A and E, which are good for growth and health.

"Because the bulls we deal with are above average for growth, they have an additional need for more minerals," he explains, "so our mineral program is pretty souped up."

### Turning them out

Once your yearling bulls are ready for their first breeding season, keep in mind that the extra care you've given them doesn't stop when you turn them out. Experts advise precautionary steps prior to turnout to prevent injury, sickness or death.

"I'm convinced that a yearling bull can do just as much work as an older bull," Yeager says. "But he'll get run down quicker

and need a little extra care than other bulls will. One thing I've found is that, when you turn out a bunch of yearling bulls with older bulls, it's much harder on the younger bulls. They get run off and beat up by the older bulls."

Yeager advises turning out yearling bulls a couple of weeks prior to turning out older bulls. This allows them to get adjusted to the cow herd and to their new environment. Later on, start pulling the young bulls out for the rest of the season and replacing them with older bulls. That way, you're always using fresh bulls on your cows.

Producers should keep yearling bulls completely segregated from older bulls during their first breeding season. "Don't put a young bull in with an old bull," McDonnell says.

Yearling bulls in smaller pastures with one water source should be able to service 30-35 cows. Yearling bulls in big country should be able to service 25 cows, he says.

### After breeding season

Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of young-bull development comes after the

breeding season. Once you pull a young bull from the breeding pasture, he'll probably be in poor body condition. That — not the next winter — is the time to get him back in condition. If you don't put him on good feed immediately, all the investment you made in him before the breeding season will be lost.

It's absolutely critical that a young bull regain adequate body condition by fall, or else the cold months of winter may put him on a negative plane of nutrition when next year's breeding season arrives.

"If a young bull goes into winter in bad shape, it will hurt his fertility next year," Yeager says.

McDonnell adds, "It's important for yearling bulls, as it is with first-calf heifers, to bring them in and give them a little extra feed. It'll help get some condition back on them, and they'll make a better 2-year-old bull."

