



**Y**earling bulls coming off conventional grain tests boast incredible gains and are a sight to behold. If you keep enough groceries in front of them, they can even do limited breeding duty with a group of 15 cows or so. It's a pretty good deal. There's just one problem — that's not what some buyers want.

"The producers tell us they need long-yearlings or 2-year-old bulls," says Diego Gimenez, Auburn Extension animal scientist and director of the Wiregrass Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) Bull Grazing Evaluation Center. "These bulls are ready to do their jobs," he adds, referring to the bulls developed through the Wiregrass forage bull test.

"The forage test is a nice, slow way to develop range-ready bulls," says producer Jay Evers.

"My partner likes the 2-year-old bulls. They are a little harder, and the sort has been done. Buyers should feel good about what they are getting on sale day."

Evers, a producer from Birmingham, Ala., plays a dual role in the Wiregrass test. He and partner Gaines Lanier have a 50-cow registered Angus herd and a 600-cow Angus-based commercial operation. Evers, who currently has nine bulls on his fourth Wiregrass test, typically consigns his top one or two indexing bulls to the sale and then brings home the rest to use in the commercial herd.

### Advantages extolled

"The forage test is a little more natural," says Stan Windham, Coffee County, Ala., Extension agent. "Producers say the way we develop bulls is more typical of what they do at home. They are going to do as much with their cows as they can with green stuff."

"There is less chance of harming the bulls with founder on a forage test," adds Wendell McElhenney, Gimenez's co-worker in Auburn's animal science department.

"The bulls hold up better and are older bulls," says Phil Farris, a cattleman from Elba, Ala. "They don't require as much management and don't lose as much weight as quickly as bulls off grain tests."

Farris also plays a double role in the Wiregrass test. He has purchased bulls out of the test sale for 10 years, and the last five years he has hosted and managed the test on his farm.

Farris says he also likes the information he gets with the bulls. The average daily gain (ADG) is supplied from the tests, as well as the frame score and weight per day of age (WDA). Carcass ultrasound information is furnished and a complete breeding soundness exam is done before the October sale. Expected progeny differences (EPDs) are calculated, and the consignors supply pedigree information.

In addition, the producer/consignors who make up the bull test committee must give their approval on a bull's structure and disposition as well as on his ADG and WDA index before the bull can sell through the test sale.

### Bull development

Top-quality forage is the key to the bulls' development. Farris plants, or tries to plant, 150 acres of rye, ryegrass, wheat and oats in mid-September. "We've only managed that once in five years because we don't have irrigation," he explains.

He also plants 95 acres of corn for a grain supplement and 100 acres of sorghum for silage and bales Bermuda and Bahai grass hay. In addition, he has Bermuda and Bahai pastures for the bulls' maintenance period from the time their test ends until sale day.

Until the cool-season grazing is ready, which is about six weeks after it is planted, and when the grazing isn't doing well because of weather, the bulls are supplemented with a high-roughage ration of either corn or soybean hull pellets, broiler litter and sorghum silage.

Farris says the Auburn animal scientists prefer the soy hulls to corn. "There is less problem with founder, and they are easier to digest."

He says it can be a challenge to know when and how much to supplement the

► Above: By the time bulls come off Alabama's Wiregrass grazing test, they will be hardy and ready to go to work.

bulls. "It is a tightwire act sometimes," he remarks. "Darrell Rankins (Auburn animal scientist) and Stan Windham are a big help on that."

Gimenez says Farris can handle the job. "It takes an experienced person with [an eye for bulls]. Phil knows. He has done it long enough." He adds, "We supervise and get the data at the right time, but Phil has the flexibility to handle the day-to-day operations."

Between the winter grazing and the supplement, the bulls gain around 2.5-3.0 pounds (lb.)/day. During the after-test maintenance period they are supplemented as needed to keep their gains around 1.0-1.5 lb./day.

The timing of the actual test depends on whether the bulls are in the senior group, born between Sept. 1 and Dec. 15 of the previous year, or the junior group, born between Dec. 16 and March 31.

The test for the senior bulls runs between Sept. 1 and Dec. 19, while the junior bulls go on test Nov. 14 and stay on test until the winter grazing runs out or goes down in quality.

That makes for a long but necessary maintenance period for the bulls, especially the senior bulls. First, Gimenez says the gain information, carcass ultrasound, scrotal circumference, and other measurements need to be taken while the bulls are around a year of age to meet Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) and breed association guidelines.

The months-long storage period is also in place to keep buyers happy. "We try to have the bulls ready right before breeding season," Windham explains. That puts the bulls in the long-yearling or 2-year-old category, which the buyers request.

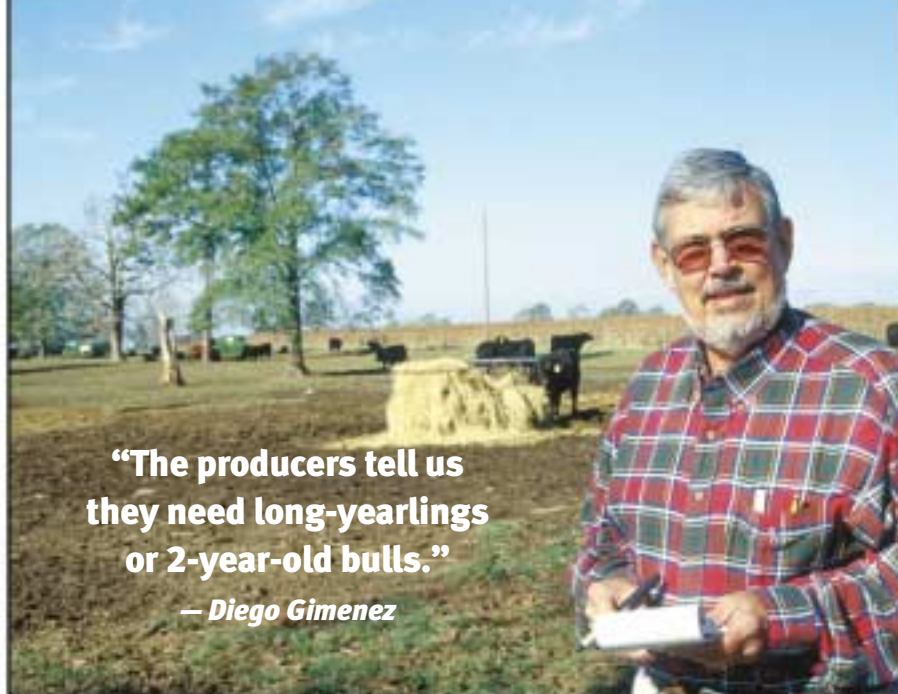
All in all, the maintenance period doesn't really add that much to the cost of the test. Gimenez says total cost of the evaluation runs around \$600-\$800/bull, including the sale cost, and is about the same as the cost of the Auburn grain test. As a bonus, he says the older bulls generally bring around \$200 more than the younger bulls sold out of the grain tests.

### Traditional tests useful

While the forage test has its benefits, the consignors are quick to say the more traditional grain tests are a useful tool, too.

Evers, who usually places bulls both at the Wiregrass forage test and Auburn's grain test, says, "Most of our cattle in this country are finished on grain. I like seeing both sides of it. As a result, we will continue to test on both fronts."

Rob Adams, a Union Springs, Ala., Angus breeder, has six bulls on the forage test, two



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*— Diego Gimenez*



► Coffee County, Ala., Extension agent Stan Windham discusses the weight gains of the senior bulls.



► The senior bulls at the Wiregrass grazing test are weighed off test in mid-December.

bulls on the grain test and 15 bulls on his on-farm test. "There are certainly advantages to both," he says, referring to the grain and forage tests. "The bulls have sold better for us at the forage test, and they are harder, and the buyers can take them home and use them. The bulls off the grain test are younger and can fall apart without proper care."

However, he adds, "In my mind, in the grain test we find a little more out about what a bull will do converting grain to beef. When the bulls come off the grain test, they are 12 to 15 months old. It is ideal if you can push steers to a finished weight at that age."

Oklahoma State University (OSU) animal scientist John Evans, who manages Oklahoma's grain test, agrees. He says both forage and grain tests have their merits, depending on the objectives or goals of the

producers testing the bulls. "The advantage we have with our test," he says, "is we are pushing cattle to perform in an environment similar to what their steer contemporaries are going to have to perform in."

Evans also says the higher the gains, the more likely there will be more noticeable differences between bulls. However, he says, "The bulls with the genes for high growth in postweaning performance are going to gain better on grain or grass."

In Alabama, consignors continue to bring bulls to the forage test so the buyers can select range-ready performance-tested bulls. Currently, 72 senior bulls and 64 junior bulls graze the winter annuals at the Farris farm. While they don't post the bragging-right gains of the bulls on grain tests, they are ready to go to the breeding pasture and work.

