Care for Your Investment

Management Tips for the Yearling Bull

Yearling bulls can be successfully used in most any ranch situation if proper management and common sense are utilized. If yearling bulls are not properly managed, however, problems can occur.

For yearling bulls to perform at their potential during the breeding season, they must be properly conditioned (i.e., properly fed and exercised) before the season begins. Conception rates can be reduced if bulls are too thin. Furthermore, overly fat bulls have a tendency to be sluggish and inactive. A bull should be fed so a good, thrifty condition is maintained. Availability and quality of pastures or forage, as well as the bull's weight, age and activity should be considered.

Young bulls evaluated for performance on a 140-day feed test (or other young bulls fed for maximum growth), represent a common concern. Performance testing young bulls should have no detrimental effect on the breeding ability of yearlings, but many are self-fed a high energy ration in a facility which provides little opportunity for exercise. Such test graduates are soft (even if feed is reduced between completion of the test and the time the bull is sold or brought home for use), and must be conditioned carefully before they are used.

A bull purchased from a test station should be isolated from the herd for about one month, suggests Wayne R. Wagner, West Virginia extension livestock specialist and bull test coordinator. During that time, he should be allowed to run in a one- to two-acre lot to provide him with enough exercise to get in shape. **Do not** immediately place him in with a group of open cows or heifers, emphasizes Wagner. Likewise, do not place him in a lot with older bulls because he may be injured or intimidated by them.

A good management practice is to expose a yearling bull to one or two females (in heat) at least 30 days prior to the breeding season. This will ensure that he is physically capable of serving a cow.

A semen check on young bulls (and older bulls, too) is also strongly suggested. Measuring the scrotal circumference is an excellent way to check for semen quantity since there is a very high relationship between the two. (Refer to our February issue, page 36.) Thirty centimeters is considered a minimum acceptable scrotal circumference for 13- to 14-month-old bulls. (Many ranches and test stations provide scrotal circumference measurements and some do semen analyses as well.)

To ensure a high percent of bred females, limit the number of cows a young bull is expected to breed to 15 to 20 during a 60- to 90-day breeding season. There are exceptions, of course (some young bulls can settle up to 50 cows under ideal conditions), and there are several determining factors. Sex drive, condition of the bull, availability and quality of feed, terrain, environmental conditions, etc., must be considered.

Bulls, properly conditioned before the breeding season, can be expected to lose weight and condition during the breeding season. When cows are receiving optimum feed to ensure maximum first-service conception rates, there is usually plenty of feed available for the yearling bull. Condition of yearlings should be carefully observed, however, and feed should be supplemented if necessary. (A young bull soon learns to eat from a bucket when grain is offered daily, says Wagner.)

Extending the breeding season beyond 60 days does not increase the number of females a yearling bull can be bred to, though. Bulls, particularly young bulls, need some time off—time to get their minds off their job and to regain lost weight, adds Wagner.

Incorporating three- to four-day rest periods every 10 to 14 days can increase the breeding capacity of young bulls, but is definitely not applicable under all circumstances. In multiple-sire herds, yearling bulls are often rotated on a weekly basis. This practice allows young bulls to rest and receive some extra feed, and also minimizes the risk of a sterile bull staying with the cow herd during the entire breeding season.

Prolonged use of young bulls or extended exposure to the cow herd will restrict not only their growth and development, but also their fertility.

As with any bull, the most important question concerning a yearling bull remains: Is he settling cows? Record breeding dates and watch carefully for repeat breeders.

Again, the length of the breeding season should not exceed 45 to 60 days. At the end of the breeding season, **remove** the bull from the cow herd. He is a young, growing animal and has a higher energy and protein requirement than the cow herd. Leaving him with the cow herd will retard his growth and could reduce his fertility.

It is important that young bulls receive adequate feed following the breeding season so they can continue to grow and recover body condition prior to the next breeding season. At the end of the first breeding season, says Wagner, your yearling bull should weigh as much as when he came off test.

Remember, your yearling bull is an investment. AJ