



# INSURANCE



## FOR YOUR COW HERD

*Why you should trich-test your bulls.*

*Story & photos by Joann Pipkin*

*From genetics to marketing to technology, today's cattlemen have plenty of homework when it comes to being on the cutting edge in an ever-competitive beef industry. Missouri Angus breeder Brock Meyer makes sure his homework includes testing bulls for trichomoniasis, or trich. Meyer, who operates Meyer Cattle Co., Curryville, Mo., says trich-testing his bulls adds extra confidence in his product at sale time.*

*Continued on page 22*









“Our customers don’t have to worry about it, because they know we’ve done our homework,” Meyer says. “We’ve done all the right things to ensure that there won’t be a problem [with trich].”

All of Meyer’s bulls 18 months of age and older are tested for trich, a venereal disease, before the farm’s annual spring bull sale.

“You can never be too cautious,” he says.

Meyer isn’t alone in his thinking. Fellow Angus breeder Mike Switzer, who operates Quartermaster Creek Ranch with wife Annie near Leedey, Okla., markets more than 100 mostly 2-year-old virgin bulls each year, primarily through a special sale at his ranch.

“When we started trich-testing, it was a new thing to us,” Switzer explains.

That was about eight years ago. With his ranch located just 30 miles from Texas and 80 miles from Kansas, Switzer says interstate travel made it almost a necessity to trich-test the bulls he was selling.

Then, he discovered the real merits of marketing a bull that had been trich-tested.

Realizing a trich-positive bull can have devastating consequences on a cow herd, Switzer says, “As a breeder, I think it is just good stockmanship [to trich test]. It’s good stockmanship [to pass on] to the new owner, but it also gives me a guarantee to that new owner that the bull was clean when he left here. That has merit for both the customer and the seller.”

“Bulls are going to be permanent carriers, nonsymptomatic, appearing healthy,” says Linda Hickam, Missouri’s state veterinarian.

“It’s a bull issue where the problem manifests in the cow herd and in loss of pregnancy,” explains veterinarian Voyd Brown.

Brown’s Barry County Missouri clinic has seen its share of trich cases in recent years. According to the Missouri Department of Agriculture’s website, the county — which borders Arkansas to the south — reported more trich-positive results (24) than any other county in the state in 2016.

“It’s so easy for cattle to move interstate now,” Brown says.

Once thought of as a disease faced only by cattlemen in the western United States, Hickam said Missouri began trich-testing in early 2010. On Sept. 1, 2011, the state also started enforcing trich regulations for bulls sold, leased, bartered or

traded within the state. Those regulations require all non-virgin bulls and all bulls older than 24 months of age be tested for the disease.

“We started learning more and more from bull producers and veterinarians that it was becoming an issue, and more

from the southwest part of our state where our cattle population and the density is much higher,” she says.

Trich regulations in Switzer’s home state of Oklahoma are similar to those in Missouri. Since Jan. 1, 2011, Oklahoma ranchers have been required to test bulls changing ownership within the state. Currently, a trich test is required for any bull older than 12 months of age that is changing ownership except for bulls sold only for slaughter, bulls that are fed at a commercial feedlot for slaughter only, and



*A trichomoniasis test can be a good insurance policy for seedstock producers, even when marketing virgin bulls.*

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*In Oklahoma, a trichomoniasis test is required for any bull older than 12 months of age that is changing ownership.*

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## **GETTING TO KNOW TRICH**

Trichomoniasis is a parasite, a protozoan, that can be found in the reproductive organs of infected male cattle. It is transmitted sexually when a bull mounts and breeds a cow.

*Continued on page 24*



## MISSOURI MAKES HEADWAY IN BATTLE AGAINST TRICH

“To me, [trich] is the most financially devastating disease our seedstock producers and the cattle industry have had to face during my career,” says Missouri State Veterinarian Linda Hickam.

The Show-Me State has fought hard to keep trichomoniasis cases at bay since 2010 when it began seeing an increase in the disease. In fact, the number of trich positives declined nearly 80% from 2012 to 2017.

Hickam’s plea is simple: If you’re purchasing a non-virgin bull, make sure you see a trich test on him before turning him out to breed cows.

Leasing bulls puts a herd at higher risk for trich, she says, advising cattlemen to make sure those bulls have tested negative for the disease.

Purchasing open cows also puts a cattleman in a vulnerable position.

“Cows less than 120 days pregnant are at higher risk for trich if you don’t know the producer or herd of origin,” Hickam explains. “Not that you can’t handle them, but you just need to be aware that it’s a little bit more risky.”

To combat the number of trich cases in the state, the Missouri Department of Agriculture, in cooperation with University of Missouri Extension and the Missouri Cattlemen’s Association, worked to develop concise messaging and veterinary education sessions throughout the state. The programs helped both commercial cattlemen and seedstock producers learn what to look for, how to test for trich and provided information about health regulations governing the disease.

Some seedstock producers already have biosecurity measures implemented on their farms, so Hickam says to prevent trich you need to be aware of bulls and open cows that are brought onto the operation.

“For seedstock producers, having a trich test on a bull is a good insurance policy because you can market that bull as negative even if it’s a virgin bull,” Hickam says. “If that bull were to come back later and test positive for trich, it’s pretty good insurance to validate that the bull was trich-free when he went into that herd.”





for virgin bulls less than 24 months of age, according to the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry's Animal Industry website.

When a trich-positive bull breeds a cow, Brown says the organism actually sets up house around the cervix of the cow, causing an infection that eventually travels to the uterus.

"Typically, 30 to 90 days postbreeding, that cow is pregnant, but the infection has set up and has gradually achieved a high enough level of the organism in the cow to damage the pregnancy," he explains. "The cow will then abort."

Generally, a producer might see a cow continually come back into heat, but not at the typical 18- to 21-day interval.

"It will be an extended period of time," Hickam notes. "She might go completely over one heat cycle, and sometimes two, before she'll actually come back into heat."

Yet, a major problem is often not detected in a cow herd until pregnancy check.

"We've had producers with up to 50% and higher open cows that have been affected by trichomoniasis," she said.

"I recommend any bull being sold — even if he's a 12-month-old bull — be trich-tested," Brown notes. "I'm not saying this because I want to trich-test a bull. I'm just saying this from a biosecurity standpoint. It's something that needs to be done."

As breeding season ramps up, Brown recommends trich-testing as part of a bull's breeding soundness exam. At a minimum, he says that should be completed two weeks prior to bull turnout. A trich test is considered valid for at least 30 days provided the bull hasn't been exposed to the cow herd, he says.

Instituting a controlled breeding season and pregnancy checking the cow herd also go a long way in helping to control the disease, Brown says.

While both Switzer and Meyer realize the value in trich-testing, they also see a need for their customers to continue validating their bull purchase year after year.

Trich-testing has become a part of Switzer's normal herd health program as a seedstock producer.

"If you're handling the bulls anyway, why not [trich-test them]?" he says. "It's just almost the equivalent of not giving your normal shots, your dewormer, everything else."

The buck doesn't stop once the bull leaves the farm, he says. Switzer says bull buyers must understand the risk for trich to develop later still exists.

"Fences are a good thing, but we all know cattle can get together," he says.

Meyer calls trich-testing an inexpensive insurance policy for a seedstock producer, especially when buying cattle and bringing them onto your farm or ranch.

"The cost is pretty cheap because you know having open cows would be much more expensive than the cost of the test," he says. **AJ**



*Through producer education and stepped-up education, Missouri has seen the number of trich-positives in the Show-Me State decline nearly 80% from 2012 to 2017.*



## **FACING THE FACTS HEAD ON**

The economic devastation of maintaining open cows in a herd adds up quickly. Brown has seen firsthand the impact 500 open cows can have on an 800-cow operation.

An open cow is all the more reason both buyer — and seller — should test a bull for trich prior to breeding season.

The way Brown sees it, no bull can be guaranteed a virgin. Even a 10-month-old bull left in with a group of heifers or with the cow herd can become sexually active and potentially contract trich, he says.

