

Bull Test Tips

If you are planning to put bulls on test, these veteran bull test operators offer advice to help you prepare.

Story & photos by **Kindra Gordon**

Central bull tests have built a reputation as a way for producers to gain insight into the performance of their breeding programs. Bull tests offer the added benefit of another market for bulls and increased exposure and promotion for the operations that consign to them.

Of course, consignors hope the animals they put on test will produce impressive results and command an attractive selling price. The *Angus Journal* asked several experienced bull test operators for tips to help achieve that goal.

Although the methods of testing and ranking bulls at test stations can vary, test operators say there are some management commonalities producers can incorporate at the ranch that may help bulls perform their best once put on test. Here, they share their comments.

Health comes first

Wayne Wagner, an Extension beef cattle specialist who works with the West Virginia Bull Evaluation Program near Wardensville, says his first rule for success in bull tests is

that breeders must have a good herd health program on the ranch.

"You've got to keep them healthy. They've got to eat if you want them to perform," says Wagner, who has been involved with the West Virginia program since 1981 and other bull tests prior to that.

"Health is very important, given the extra stress of shipping to the test from a breeder's farm or ranch," echoes Russ Pepper, who has operated the Treasure Bull Test near Simms, Mont., with his wife, Barb, for the past 25 years.

"A good vaccination program before delivery is key. Sick cattle do not perform well and fall out of the top very quickly," adds Bob Pingetzer, bull test manager for the Wyoming Beef Cattle Improvement Association (WBCIA) bull test at Shoshoni.

Johnny Rossi, an Extension animal scientist with the University of Georgia, is involved with Georgia's Tifton Bull Evaluation Center at Irwinville.

He says they recommend vaccination against infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD), parainfluenza-3 virus (PI₃), bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV), seven-way blackleg, five-way leptospirosis, pasteurella and *Haemophilus somnus*.

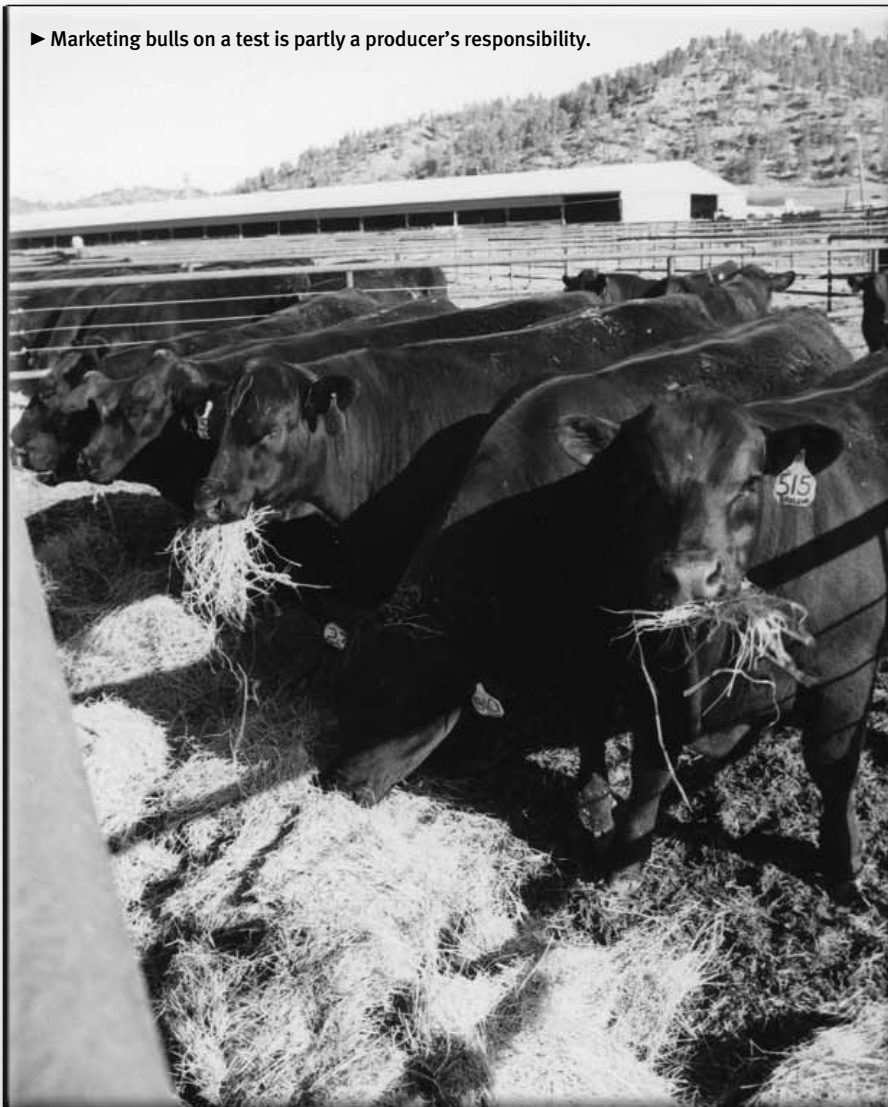
Additionally, these veterans suggest incoming bulls should be weaned and already started on feed prior to arrival at the test facility. Tim Stidham, director of Oklahoma Beef Inc. (OBI) at Stillwater, likes bulls to be vaccinated and weaned at least one month before going on test. Stidham, who has been with the OBI bull test for 18 years, also says bulls should be experienced with being on feed.

"Producers need to teach them to be on feed," he explains. "It puts bulls two weeks ahead when they go on test."

Rossi recommends similar guidelines and says, "Most bulls will perform well if their weight per day of age (WDA) at delivery is about 3 pounds (lb.) per day. We require them to be a minimum of 2.5 pounds per day."

Wagner also suggests an average WDA of 3 lb. when bulls arrive at the test. He says,

► Marketing bulls on a test is partly a producer's responsibility.



"We want to simulate the environment that commercial customers would run these cattle in. Bulls with a weight per day of age over 3.5 pounds are too heavy, and I believe that gets cattle to their growth curve too quickly. But I also don't want cattle shrunk out, so we have a minimum of 2.25 pounds per day when bulls come in."

However, the test managers are mixed in their opinions on offering creep feed to bulls prior to arrival at a test.

"We have seen good performance in bulls that are creep-fed prior to delivery," Rossi says.

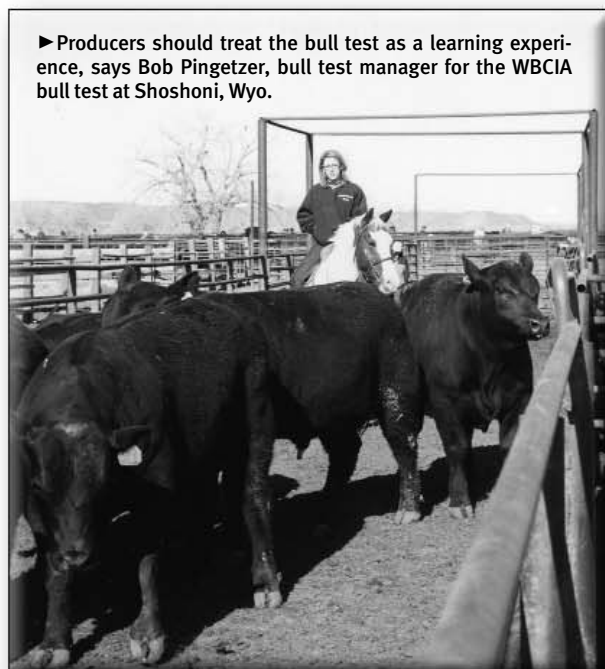
But Wagner doesn't recommend the practice. He believes it clouds the issue of the dam's milking ability and says, "We want to know what cattle do on forage. If we find cattle that do well here, they should do well on forage anywhere."

It really boils down to economics, Stidham says. "Bulls who have had creep feed tend to be bigger when they go on test and when they leave, which means they may bring a little more money. But you have to look at the economics of paying for the creep feed, and it often does not pay."

Selecting bulls

Oklahoma's Stidham says he is commonly asked what "type" of animal fits bull tests best. He tells producers the kind of bulls they've had success in selling to customers will work well on test, too.

"Breeders should send their very best to a central test in order to be competitive," Pepper says. He recommends that bulls coming to test should have a weaning weight ratio of at least 100 and a very strong 205-day weight.



► Producers should treat the bull test as a learning experience, says Bob Pingetzer, bull test manager for the WBCIA bull test at Shoshoni, Wyo.

More about these bull test programs

- Operating since 1973, Oklahoma Beef Inc. (OBI) at Stillwater is now the second-largest test station in the United States, testing approximately 1,200-1,700 bulls yearly. About half of those are Angus bulls. OBI merchandises bulls through two all-breed sales conducted in March and October.
- The West Virginia Bull Evaluation Program near Wardensville has been in place since 1966, with the annual sale every fourth Thursday in March. The test has had as many as 200 head on test, but in the last few years, it has scaled back to 150 head per year in order to utilize the GrowSafe Model 4000 system, which measures feed intake. About 90% of the bulls on test are Angus.
- Located at Shoshoni, the Wyoming Beef Cattle Improvement Association (WBCIA) bull test typically has 150 to 350 head consigned, with the majority being black and red Angus. It hosts an annual sale the first Saturday in April. Breeders can elect to consign bulls to the test, but not sell them through the sale.
- Treasure Bull Test at Simms, Mont., will begin its 37th year when bulls begin arriving this October. The test includes primarily Angus bulls, as well as a sprinkling of a few other breeds. The annual sale is in early April. Treasure Bull Test has both a spring bull division (bulls born between Dec. 15 and March 31), and a fall bull division (bulls born between Aug. 15 and Dec. 14). They also host a Single Shot Jackpot division, to which a breeder can consign one bull to compete for a cash jackpot.
- The Tifton Bull Evaluation Center has been performance-testing bulls since 1958. The current center is located at Irwinville, Ga., and was built in 1995. Approximately 225 bulls are tested each year, with the annual sale the first Wednesday in March.

For a list of these test stations and others, including contact information, see the 2004 Resource Edition insert published in the August *Angus Journal*.

"I like to see a bull's dam have a very good yearling weight ratio average on her past progeny," he adds.

Pingetzer also encourages producers to bring in some of their best bulls and says, "They should represent your herd's top cattle if you want buyers to come and look at the rest of the cattle at your ranch."

Rossi adds, "You do not want to send a bull with structural problems, as they will only get worse at the test station."

Wagner recommends that producers put more than just one or two animals from a herd on test. "You've got to have contemporaries on test," he explains. "The larger the contemporary group, the more meaningful the performance and/or ultrasound information becomes."

Wagner reports that the test at Wardensville, W.Va., requires that producers put a minimum of three contemporaries on test. He suggests a minimum of five contemporaries.

Follow through

Lastly, these managers emphasize that marketing

the bulls on a test is partly a producer's responsibility. "I tell producers it is a consignment sale," Wagner says. "We bring buyers, but they should help promote the sale and bring buyers as well."

Wyoming's Pingetzer agrees, and says producers should let their past buyers know about the cattle they have at a test and promote them beyond test advertisements.

Producers should treat the bull test as a learning experience, Pingetzer adds. "The test should serve more than one purpose, otherwise producers shouldn't get involved." He points out that it is an opportunity to compare cattle to others under the same conditions, to promote their offering to new buyers who would not normally see their cattle, and to sell bulls to buyers in new areas.

And, for any breeder who sells seedstock, customer service is still critical. Stidham credits OBI's growth as the second-largest bull test in the nation to its focus on customer satisfaction.

"We do a lot of follow-up with our buyers," he says. Stidham even makes herd visits to see how customers' calves are performing and how they are being sold. Each summer, OBI also hosts an annual customer appreciation field day, where buyers in a panel discussion explain exactly what they are looking for so consignors can prepare for the next year.

