

Developing Breeding Bulls

Nutrition consultant advises against overfeeding bulls; offers tips for developing bulls at each stage of development.

by **TROY SMITH**, *field editor*

There is an old saying that pertains to ranchers and stock farmers who buy breeding bulls: None want to buy a fat bull, but none will bid on a thin one. Accordingly, many seedstock sellers wrestle with the dilemma of how to get bulls fat enough to sell without ruining their serviceability. Too-fat bulls run the risk of becoming unsound on their feet, failing a semen test or melting down during breeding season.



Few bull-development programs are based on knowledge backed by research, because little applied research data exists, says Dan Larson, Great Plains Livestock Consulting Inc. Instead, bull-development programs are based largely on personal experience, anecdotal evidence and a little "magic."

Development of breeding bulls and overly fat bulls were discussed during the Applied Reproductive Strategies in Beef Cattle (ARSBC) symposium hosted last fall in Manhattan, Kan. Addressing the topic was Dan Larson, a nutritionist with Great Plains Livestock Consulting Inc., who said feeding bulls to 0.20 to 0.25 inches of fat cover is adequate for energy reserves, growth and semen production.

"That's plenty for any bull," stated Larson. "Unfortunately, the norm is greater."

According to Larson, few bull-development programs are based on knowledge backed by research, because little applied research data exists. So, bull-development programs are based largely on personal experience, anecdotal evidence and a little "magic." Larson said more secret formulas are applied to bull development than to any other industry segment, except show cattle.

"We need to apply some aspects of feedlot management to bull development," opined Larson. "We need to use what's been learned about maintaining rumen health and soundness of feet."

Larson listed bull tests among the development programs that ruin too many bulls. He called them a potentially good way to compare genetics, but said the bulls are often pushed for maximum gain rather than allowed to simply express genetic potential. Larson said another contributor to the problem of overfed bulls are "specialty feed additives" that are more about marketing than science-based nutrition.

Also criticized for fostering rumen and feet problems were development programs utilizing self-feeders. Larson said self-feeders have "destroyed more bulls than a castration knife," because there is no way to adequately control animal intake. As for intake-limiting technologies, Larson said he considers them ineffective.

Offering recommendations for each stage of bull development, Larson said preweaning supplementation (creep-feeding) definitely has an impact. He fears the practice is oversold, though it often is rewarded on the auction block. In his opinion, however, long-term creep-feeding can undermine bull longevity.

Larson allowed that creep-feeding for a short time, two to four weeks prior to weaning, can help adapt bull calves to a postweaning ration. During the postweaning development period, nutrition should be managed much like it is done for cattle coming into a feedlot, with multi-step adaptation to rations containing higher amounts of concentrates. Roughage in the ration is essential to control dietary energy and manage intake. Postweaning growth targets should be within the range of 2.5 to 3.25 pounds of gain per day, on average.

Because overfed bulls will lose weight when turned out on pasture during the breeding season, Larson recommended bulls be "hardened" well in advance. He advised transitioning bulls to pasture at least 80 days before turnout.

To listen to Larson's presentation and for additional coverage of ARSBC 2017, visit the Newsroom at www.appliedreprostrategies.com. Compiled by Angus Media, the site is made possible through sponsorship by the Beef Reproduction Task Force. The 2018 ARSBC Symposium will be Aug. 29-30 in Ruidoso, N.M. Information for this year's meeting will be added soon.



Editor's Note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.

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