

# HEALTH & HUSBANDRY

## Don't forget the bull

by Lacey Fahrmeier, Stillwater Veterinary Clinic, Absarokee, Mont.



The morning air is perfectly crisp, fat shiny calves line the bunks, and steam rolls off the

backs of cows just gathered for preg-checking. It's truly the best season to be a cattleman, or a vet for that matter. Sure there are long, hectic days, but reaping the rewards of the year's labor and getting a glimpse of what lies ahead are worth it.

For me, personally, preg-checking rivals Christmas morning in terms of anticipation and excitement.

It's the unveiling of so many important outcomes: Did we reach that artificial insemination (AI) conception target? Was that new synch protocol worth the effort? Were we able to move those late calvers up? Did that beautiful set of replacements pass their first test?

On the flip side, if at day's end the results fall short of expectations, the mood chuteside is anything but cheery. As the disappointing reality sinks in, we discuss a myriad of potential reasons that might be to blame for the poor reproductive performance, analyzing everything from that switch in vaccine or mineral program to the implications of climate and forage quality.

Oftentimes we forget about the factor that can arguably have the largest impact on conception rate — *the bull*. We presume that if he had two testicles, was upright when we checked pastures and passed a semen test at some point in his life, he should have gotten the job done.

Unfortunately, lots of things can go wrong when we neglect this

critical piece of the equation. It has been estimated that one in five bulls in an unselected population will be subfertile due to physical unsoundness or poor semen quality. When you consider reproductive merit is five times more important to beef cow-calf producers economically than growth performance, and at least 10 times more than product quality, it's clear that the bull battery warrants careful evaluation and management.

### Preseason prep

There are measures that should be taken to assure the bull battery is at peak performance heading into the breeding season. I once heard veterinarian Chance Armstrong at Louisiana State say he views beef bulls as the Olympic athletes of the bovine world. You don't get to that level without some serious preseason effort and disciplined planning. Our bulls should be no different.

It all starts with having them in an ideal body condition (somewhere around a 6). Too heavy and they may begin to deposit fat in the neck of the scrotum causing thermoregulation issues that can lead to problems with proper sperm development. Starting the season too thin, or providing inadequate nutrition, particularly for young bulls, can have negative effects on semen production and their ability to service cows.

In the months leading up to the breeding season, get your bulls toned up by putting feed and water at opposite ends of their pasture to encourage exercise. Provide a good clean water source and avoid areas of standing water to decrease the risk for transmission of diseases

such as leptospirosis and foot rot.

When bringing in new bulls, be vigilant about disease surveillance. Bulls can be carriers of bovine viral diarrhea (BVD), trichomoniasis (trich), Johne's disease, and bovine leukosis virus (BLV) to name a few. Avoid a devastating outbreak by testing them before you expose them to your herd.

### Don't skip the BSE

Having a quality breeding soundness exam (sometimes referred to as a BSE) done on every bull, every year (regardless of age) is pivotal to reproductive success. You wouldn't put in a crop without insurance or risk driving your car down the road uninsured, so why take chances with your herd's productivity and possible viability?

The purpose of a BSE is to identify those subfertile or infertile bulls before they have a chance to cause a wreck. Test bulls four to six weeks prior to turnout. This provides time to intervene if a treatable abnormality such as an infection of the reproductive tract, lameness or penile warts are detected. It also provides a buffer to allow for retesting of bulls that may fail the initial exam due to a

recent stressful event.

Stressful events such as inclement weather, feed shortages and pain from lameness or disease cause a dramatic rise in cortisol and greatly affect sperm development. It can take up to four to six weeks for a bull's semen production to rebound after such insulting events; ensuring they have recovered and are ready to perform is essential.

Don't leave the boys out of your herd health protocol; be sure to administer viral, clostridial and lepto vaccinations annually. By making bulls a priority and not an afterthought, you'll minimize one of the biggest risk factors for poor reproductive performance and put the joy back in preg-check day. |

Editor's note: "Health & Husbandry" is a regular column in the *Angus Beef Bulletin* devoted to the care and well-being of the herd. Author Lacey (Robinson) Fahrmeier works in private practice with the team at Stillwater Veterinary Clinic in Absarokee, Mont.



**Oftentimes we forget about the factor that can arguably have the largest impact on conception rate — the bull.**