



Bulls should be managed separately when they are not breeding cows, says University of Tennessee animal science professor James Neel.

Off-Season Bull Care

Managing bulls separate from the cow herd in the off-season is essential for a profitable cow-calf operation.

Story & photos by
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The extra effort and headaches that accompany managing bulls separate from the cow herd during the off-season highlights the list of reasons why some beef producers do not practice a controlled calving season.

“Although it is a challenge, developing and maintaining a 60- to 90-day calving season is the first step — and is essential — for a profitable cow-calf operation,” says University of Tennessee (UT) animal science professor James Neel. “This is not new; it’s basic. It’s not glamorous, does not require use of high technology and does not require any type of computer-driven management program.”

But it does require removing bulls from the herd and allowing the bulls to reside in their own grass traps for 9-11 months (mo.) of the

year. If you’ve been in the cattle business for even one breeding season, you know how important cows are to a bull. If he’s an honest worker with a high libido (sex drive), he’ll be interested in finding cows to breed and may give little respect to anything that stands in the way.

“Grab a pair of fencing pliers for the first four days of weaning the bulls from the cows,” says Stan Pelton, owner of Stan Pelton Livestock, Absarokee, Mont. His family operation has managed a 55- to 60-day breeding season for more than 28 years.

If a bull can be kept in a grass trap by himself, he and the cow herd can be managed correctly. That’s basic management, Pelton says.

Manage to fit operation

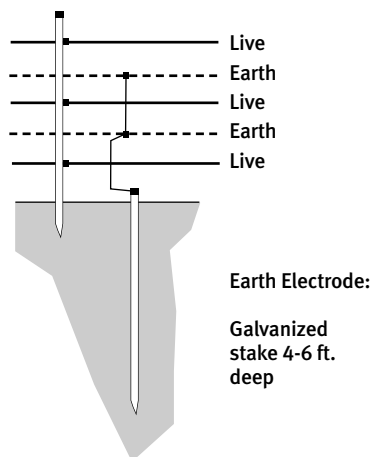
If bulls will run in multiple-sire pastures during the breeding season, one important aspect to consider is pecking order, says Glenn Selk, beef

Fence stout, fence smart

Fencing a bull separately during the off-season can be a challenge, but a producer can increase his or her odds of keeping the bull in the right pen by using good fencing techniques.

“Put him behind high-tensile fencing with one of the good, high-powered chargers on it, and he isn’t going to go anywhere,” says cattleman John Spitzer, former researcher at Clemson University, Clemson, S.C.

Fig. 1



Source: www.dasnr.okstate.edu/cherokeeprairie/.

“You have to have a fence that a bull is going to respect. We really like the electrified fence,” he explains, “because you can build a board fence or you can build a woven-wire fence and they are still going to rub on it and wear it down from the top. With the electrified fence, they just don’t touch the fence.”

Clemson researchers use a five-strand, high-tensile fence

with the strands spaced 10 inches (in.) apart. The first strand is placed 10 in. off the ground, and the end result is a 50-in. fence. High-tensile wire is a smooth, heavy-gauge wire that can be made as a permanent system with in-line wire stretchers.

“You have got to put in some really good, stout corner posts where you can really stretch that wire good and tight, and then it is important to insulate it correctly,” Spitzer says.

The fence will need an electrical charge from a high-voltage, low-ampere energizer. “Probably the biggest weakness that most people have with the high-power chargers is they never put enough ground on them,” Spitzer points out. “They never put enough ground rods to really take advantage of those chargers.”

The Clemson design uses the second, third and fifth wires as charge wires, and the first and fourth wires are grounds. Other designs have the first, third and fifth as live wires and second and fourth as grounds (see Fig. 1). Either pattern will work, but the grounds will be most effective if they are set deep into the soil.

For more information on electrical fencing, contact a reputable fencing company representative or visit www.foothill.net/~ringram/fenceopt.htm or http://msucares.com/pubs/publications/pub2023_37.htm.

Source: Some information was gathered from an article, “What to Do With the Bull?,” at www.dasnr.okstate.edu/cherokeeprairie/.

research specialist at Oklahoma State University (OSU).

If there are multiple-sire pastures, “putting those bulls together in the off-season allows them to get the pecking order established,” Selk says. “Then they don’t have to do their fighting during the start of a breeding season.”

While establishing a pecking order before the breeding season can be advantageous, Pelton says there are also disadvantages. Pelton’s cows are stocked at 20-40 acres per head, which leaves a lot of ground to cover for a herd sire. When multiple-sire pastures don’t have a pecking order, it can help spread the bulls out to cover the cows in the 320-640-acre pastures or larger that are common in his part of the country.

“Sometimes it takes two or three days to [establish a pecking order], but I guess that is an advantage of mixing ages of bulls in my opinion,” Pelton says of the seven to eight Angus bulls he uses on his Angus-based cow herd. “If you don’t have that pecking order established, if there’s a big difference in strength or size, those bulls will have a tendency to find dominance and subservience and go about their business in the way they have to.”

An ideal trap

Finding an ideal trap or pen to house bulls 9-11 mo. of the year can be a challenge, especially for smaller operations that may be running on less than 40 acres.

“I have a big, old, south-slope pasture that overlooks the valley here,” Pelton says of the 100-acre bull lot where he keeps his bulls when not in use. “Within 5 to 10 minutes, I can take a four-wheeler and look and make sure they are still home every day.”

Pelton adds the pasture rises 500 feet (ft.) in elevation and is very rugged. “It’s a good place for bulls to get over their aggressiveness and the mad of being weaned from the cows, so to speak.”

The south slope offers a good place for the bulls to get out of the cold, and they will remain there until water becomes a problem in mid-December, Pelton says.

In Oklahoma and the southern United States, a lack of shade from hot weather may be a cause for concern.

“I would prefer to have a grass trap with shade trees and fresh water as opposed to a drylot situation,” Selk says. “Heat stress is a real issue with bulls, so having a place where they can get some shade and some air movement is important.”

The size of the trap is one of the most popular questions with which Selk struggles. In South Carolina, two acres per bull is common, he says, which can be OK if improved grasses, like Bermuda, are grown in an area with high rainfall. But areas farther west and with lower rainfall will likely require more acres per bull.

“Keep in mind, if I can run a cow to 10 acres and that bull weighs about half again as much as the average cow in my herd, then that tells me I’d better have half again as many acres for that bull in

the off-season,” Selk points out. “In a lot of cases they are going to house that bull in that trap for about 10 months out of the year and put him in the breeding pasture two months. He’s going to need quite a little bit of pasture, or that’s going to get pretty bare.”

If grass is available a distance from the cows, bulls will remain quieter and will fight less, Selk says. Smaller operations may not have this luxury.

Nutrition management

Nutritional needs will depend greatly on the age of the bulls. Yearling bulls will more than likely come off of their first breeding season pretty thin. “It’s just the nature of the business,” Selk says.

“These cattle are still growing rapidly, in addition to replacing all the condition they lost in the breeding pasture,” Selk says. “Extra care and feeding of yearling

bulls after the breeding season will result in stronger, more attractive mature bulls with much higher salvage value.”

A key element to a nutrition program for bulls is the minimum of 12% crude protein (CP) in their diets, Selk says. He recommends cattlemen have a good idea of the protein level of their forages before formulating a supplement plan.

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During late summer, forages in his area can be as low as 6%-7% CP, which will require a higher-protein supplement, maybe near 16%, to attain the desired 12% in the total diet.

A higher percentage of protein can also be used, like Pelton's 30% protein supplement. He feeds fewer total pounds of feed than if he were feeding a 12%-CP supplement.

"We cannot be protein-deficient on these young, growing bulls," Selk states. "It's a potential problem that we have to be very, very cognizant of, and there are a lot of reasons for that."

Protein deficiency can reduce forage digestibility, and, Selk points out, research suggests that it can also impair semen production and sperm quality.

When dealing with mature bulls, usually 4 years of age or older, putting condition back on is the only required goal of a nutrition program.

"The protein requirement of that mature bull while he's just out here resting between breeding seasons is quite lower," Selk says.

Health care

Pelton says he learned the hard way to not neglect the bull battery when it comes to vaccinations and deworming.

"For years we thought that wasn't necessary, but as time has evolved in the last 10 to 15 years, I certainly take full advantage ... to deworm those bulls and give them the full viral and bacterial

series," Pelton says. "I think it has more merit than we ever thought it did."

Fly and parasite control are two important management practices, Selk adds. He also points out that foot rot can be a potential problem, especially if the grass traps where the bulls will remain have been rotary mowed or have extensive overgrowth.

"If a bull has a chance of injury due to

walking on something that's got sharp stems, that's the sort of thing that can get the bulls started into a foot rot scenario," he says.

There are many health concerns that will depend on where the operation is located. Local veterinarians can be great resources to help develop health programs that match the environment of individual operations.



Grass traps are the most favorable option for housing bulls in the off-season.

The final stand

While managing bulls separate from the cow herd in the off-season isn't always simple, the profits it may bring to an operation are notable.

"Being able to put together a group of calves that are marketable at the same time coming from the same ranch has a real marketable value," Selk says, citing several data sets. "Our data from eastern Oklahoma suggests that if we can get a group as small as 10 steer calves that all came from the same place, weighing about the same and looking about the same, they may be worth as much as \$7 per hundredweight (cwt.) more than those calves would sell for one head at a time. Over a period of time, that turns out to be a rather substantial difference in income to a 25-cow operation. And it could very well be the difference between red ink and black ink when they calculate the income versus expenses at the end of the year."

Pelton adds that 85%-92% of his calves are born within the first 21 days of the calving season. He retains ownership of his calves that are harvested at less than, or right at, 12 mo. of age and grade 70% USDA Choice or better.

He says this accomplishment has been a part of a 20-year goal, and, "bull management is an intricate part of this."

