

‘I hated pulling bulls,’ says fourth-generation Montana rancher Keon Holzer, referring to the practice of removing bulls from breeding pastures at the end of breeding season.

Located some 30 miles west of Lewistown, Mont., the Holzer operation includes scattered, noncontiguous properties with rough terrain that presents some management challenges.

“We have to drive cattle across neighbors’ land to get them in and out, so trailering bulls out in midsummer isn’t an option,” explains Holzer, noting that keeping bulls separate is a nuisance anyway.

“They’re never easier to manage than when they’re running together with the cows. So, we don’t pull bulls anymore, at least not until fall,” Holzer adds. “That’s a few more months that we don’t have to mess with them.”

Old-school

Leaving bulls with cows for the duration of the summer grazing season might be considered an old-school practice. These days, cow-calf producers are often advised to adopt a defined breeding season by limiting cow herd exposure to bulls to a predetermined period of time. Pulling bulls after 90, 60 or even fewer days results in calves being born during a chosen window of time.

Many producers find the chief advantage of a defined and relatively short calving season is a more uniform calf crop. Come marketing time, calves are closer in age and weight than calves born over a prolonged period of time.

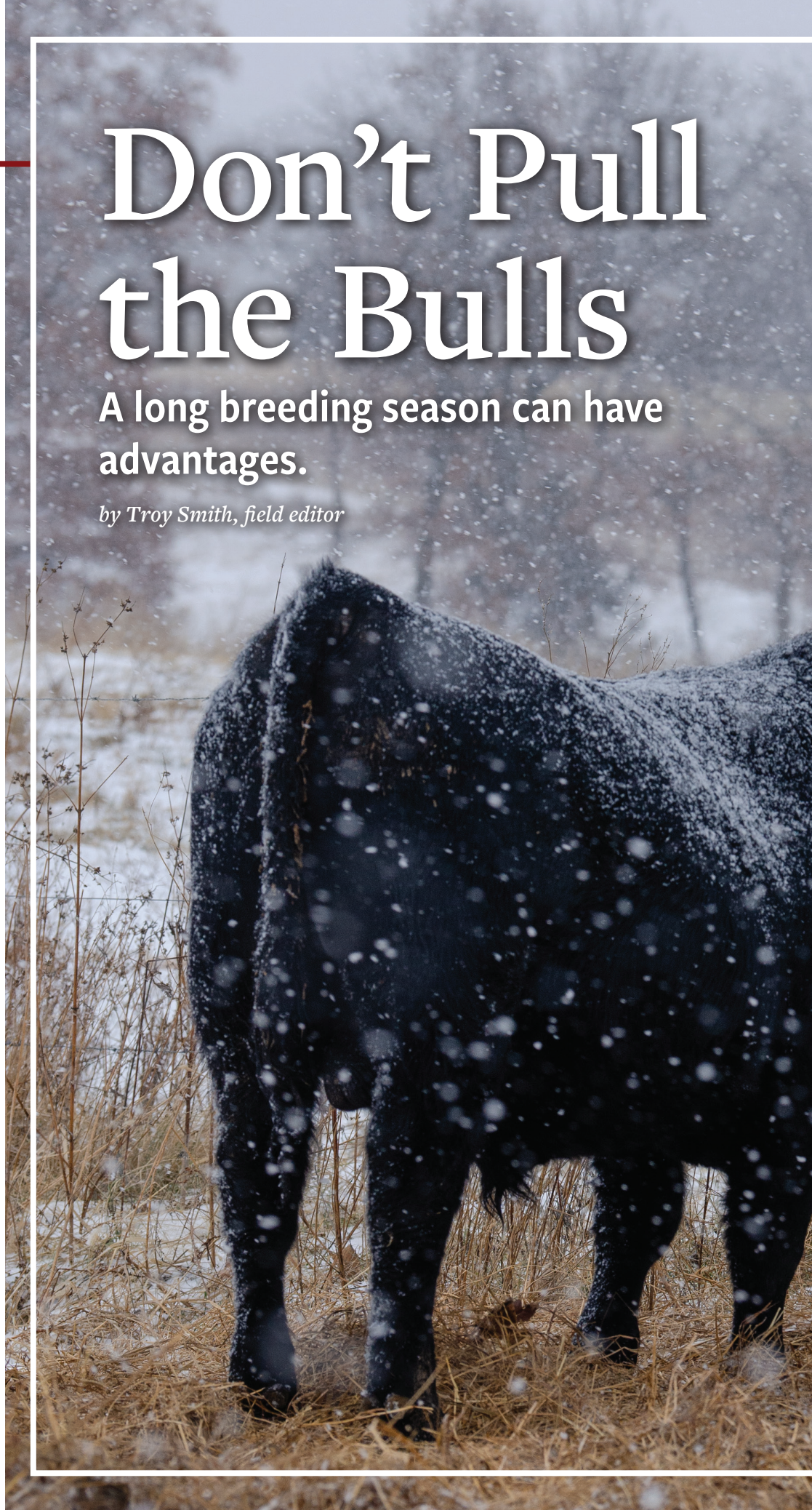
Additionally, producers may find it easier to manage cow nutrition when all cows are in the same, or nearly the same, stage of reproduction. Management of time and available labor force also may be eased when all cows deliver during a defined period.

Defining the calving period based on a predetermined breeding season also allows a manager to identify the females likely to be most reproductively fit for his or her operation. More to the point, perhaps, the

Don't Pull the Bulls

A long breeding season can have advantages.

by Troy Smith, field editor





least fit females are identified. When bulls are pulled at the end of the breeding season, and subsequent pregnancy diagnosis is performed, the nonpregnant cows can be removed from the breeding herd. Often, the open cows are marketed with those culled because of age or unsoundness.

The cost

Since a majority of U.S. beef herds calve in the spring, pregnancy diagnosis often occurs in the fall, with the sale of cull cows occurring soon afterward. Fall usually brings the most cull cows to town, so that's when prices reach seasonal lows.

Along with simplifying bull management, Holzer's long breeding season allows him to add value to cows that otherwise would sell "open" and probably for weigh-up price.

"Leaving the bulls out gets more cows pregnant. We can still control the length of our calving season by selling the late-bred cows," explains Holzer. "When we pre-check in the fall, we tell the vet our cut-off date — the date that we want to be done with calving. Our vet is pretty good at estimating when the cows will calve, and we don't keep any cows that will calve after the cut-off date."

While those cows may have conceived too late to stay in Holzer's herd, they will fit an operation that chooses a later calving period. For example, cows that bred just a little too late for their owner's March-April calving preference can fetch a good price when marketed as bred replacement females to a producer who calves in May.

Full support

Dallas Mount considers Holzer's application of a long breeding season to be a business-savvy decision. Based in Wheatland, Wyo., Mount is owner of Ranch Management Consultants and instructor for

Bulls are easier to manage with the cow herd than apart, says Montana cattleman Keon Holzer, who has stopped pulling bulls at the end of a defined breeding season.

the Ranching for Profit School. To him, both of Holzer's reasons are sound.

"Not having to manage bulls separately can be a really significant matter for some producers. Running them with the cows certainly simplifies things," states Mount, who agrees that keeping bulls separate can

be costly, as well as inconvenient. It requires another "system" for managing bulls on grazed forage or harvested feed, during whatever

length of time bulls are not with the cow herd.

"I also think it's smart to look at a long breeding season and consider opportunities to sell bred cows instead of open cows," says Mount, noting how a variation on the concept might suit some producers. "Bulls could be turned with the cows for a predetermined period, pulled for a time, and then turned back out for a second breeding season."

With this latter strategy, cows bred during the first period of exposure might fit the producer's choice of spring calving season, while cows bred during the second period could be marketed as fall-calving cows.

"Some producers do this to maintain their own spring- and fall-calving herds. I sometimes question that," cautions Mount. "If they really look at it, producers often find that one or the other herd is consistently more profitable. It may be better to concentrate on the most profitable enterprise, rather than devoting valuable resources to a less profitable one."

It will depend on their own individual goals, but Mount also thinks some producers might want to consider using a long breeding season for heifers, but extend the front end of the breeding period.

"A producer could turn bulls out ahead of the time he wants heifers bred. Say the producer wants to keep heifers that will calve in April, but turns bulls out early enough so he can package February- and

"We can still control the length of our calving season by selling the late-bred cows."

Keon Holzer

March-calving heifers to sell,” explains Mount.

That scenario could be advantageous when there is opportunity to sell the early-bred heifers for a premium price. Mount says the potential disadvantage is that those early-bred, sale heifers likely are the most fertile females, while the retained later-bred heifers may be less fertile.

Use discipline

Hugh Aljoe, a consultant with the Ardmore, Okla.-based Noble Research Institute, says disciplined managers can use a long breeding season for cow herds and still enhance the reproductive performance of those herds over time. Producers just have to be disciplined enough to define their calving season. Make a decision and stick to it.

“Keep only the cows that fit. The cows that bred early enough to fit your window should be reproductively efficient for your system,” says Aljoe. “Cows that bred too late to meet your management objectives will probably fit somebody else’s system. They’re probably going to be worth more than open cows, especially when

marketed at an advantageous time.”

According to Aljoe, the value difference between open and bred cows up to 6 years in age typically ranges from \$300 to \$500. The difference is less for older cows, often ranging from \$200 to \$300.

The best market for bred cows is usually in the spring, as cow-calf producers are getting ready to turn cattle out for the summer grazing season. However, producers must be mindful of costs associated with keeping cows until a later marketing date. Consider whether the expected price warrants the cost.

“Producers need to make themselves familiar with the markets. They need to understand market seasonality. Producers may have to keep bred cows for a while to

hit the most favorable market. If so, they will have to have sufficient low-cost forage and feed resources available,” advises Aljoe. “They also need to know if their late-bred cows will sell well locally. If the better market is elsewhere, what are the transportation costs?”

Aljoe says producers also need to understand where the beef industry is headed relative to the cattle cycle. Widespread drought has hastened the current contraction phase of the cycle, and a turnaround isn’t likely to occur until weather patterns change across large portions of cow country. However, a turnaround will come, shifting the industry into an expansion phase.

“In the next few years, I think there will be opportunity to market young bred females for a premium. The demand will be there,” says Aljoe. “Producers could be planning for it now, if they manage their forage resources in ways that give them a little cushion and the flexibility to take advantage of opportunities to add value to cattle, and be well-paid for it.” **ABB**



The value difference between open and bred cows up to 6 years in age typically ranges from \$300 to \$500, says Hugh Aljoe, consultant with the Noble Research Institute. Leaving bulls in with cows can provide a higher salvage value for cows that might fit another producer’s calving season.

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

Pregnancy diagnosis drives intentional marketing of late-bred cows

In University of Missouri (MU) Animal Scientist Jordan Thomas’s opinion, well-managed application of the long breeding season/short calving season concept is a viable way to address cow depreciation. Considered to be the second-largest cost of production, actual cow depreciation is the difference between what it costs to put a cow in the breeding herd and her salvage value at the time she leaves it. One way to manage cow depreciation is to increase salvage value.

“Cow depreciation is the reason we often hear that a cow must produce five calves before she pays for herself. I challenge that, because it assumes that she leaves as an open cow,” says Thomas, noting that she doesn’t necessarily have to go out that way.

“More salvage value can be captured through intentional marketing of pregnant cows that are underproductive in your system because they bred too late to calve during your desired calving season,” states Thomas. “Use pregnancy diagnosis, and market those late-bred cows to best advantage.”

While pregnancy diagnosis can be a valuable tool for any cow-calf

enterprise, Thomas considers it essential to managers using a long breeding season and intentional marketing of late-bred cows. For those producers, rectal palpation or diagnosis using ultrasound are the only options, he says.

“There are chemical tests (performed on blood samples taken from individual cows), but those give you only a yes-or-no answer; the cow is either pregnant or she’s not. Chemical tests won’t stage the pregnancy,” explains Thomas.

The ability to determine stage of gestation allows the producer to identify cows that will calve during his or her desired calving period. Additionally, knowing when the late-bred cows are expected to calve can aid marketing.

“I’m partial to ultrasound by a veterinarian,” shares Thomas. “I think it improves accuracy of the pregnant versus nonpregnant determination. Equally, if not more importantly, it increases the precision of the veterinarian’s estimate of fetal age and, therefore, the expected calving date.”