

Bull Management for a Successful Breeding Season

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Many bulls have been placed with spring-calving cows in Virginia in the last few days or weeks. How successful these bulls are in getting cows pregnant will determine to a large extent the profitability of these cow-calf operations. Beef producers will do well to invest some time to increase the likelihood that bulls perform well and get a high percentage of cows pregnant.

Hopefully bulls had a breeding soundness examination prior to being turned with cows. This evaluation checked bulls' health and physical soundness as well as their ability to produce adequate numbers of normal sperm cells. Things that are not checked as part of a routine breeding soundness examination, but which can have profound effects on breeding success include:

- Mating ability. Penile and erectile problems may not have been apparent when bull semen is routinely collected by electroejaculation. Some physical problems such as back pain or joint problems keep bulls from mounting cows.
- Libido or sex drive. Even though tests for this have been developed they are not widely used.
- Venereal diseases. Thankfully, these are rare in Virginia.

Mating ability and sex drive are best checked as soon as bulls are placed in the breeding pasture. Watching a cow be successfully bred is a great insurance policy to be certain that all systems are working.

Not all bulls that do not aggressively follow cows, especially ones that are in heat, fail to breed cows, but some do fail. Watch bull activity early in the morning and in the cool of the evening. In multiple bull groups expect bulls that are low in the pecking order to show much less interest in cows. Replace bulls that are simply doing no breeding.

Breeding injuries are very common happenings that result in disappointing breeding results. Any swelling or abnormal appearance around the sheath or testicles should be evaluated. Tears of the prepuce result in a protrusion of pink tissue from the opening that does not readily retract. Bulls with this problem should be removed from the breeding pasture immediately and given veterinary attention. Penile hematomas result in swelling between the sheath opening and the scrotum and should also be dealt with immediately.

Any bull lameness is best managed by removing the bull from the breeding pasture. Bulls with simple sprains or strains return to health much faster if they are not trying to follow cows. If injuries are severe not breeding will result. Even when other bulls are present in the breeding pasture a dominant lame bull may dramatically inhibit breeding by less dominant bulls that are sound.

Even when hay making and other farm activities make time tight on the farm during early summer, taking time to examine breeding bulls two or three times a week is a good investment. Dealing with problems quickly by removing and replacing bulls with problems will pay big dividends in terms of pregnant cows.