

COW/CALF CORNER

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Bull Management Before the Breeding Season

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Animal Science Professor Emeritus

The fall/winter breeding season for fall-calving herds will begin around Thanksgiving to the first part of December. Some aspects of bull management require attention to body condition months in advance. Therefore ranchers with spring breeding and calving seasons may want to give some thought to bull management throughout the winter months (even though it seems a long time away). To better understand nutritional need in proper bull management, the bull's year can be divided into three seasons:

1. Pre-breeding or conditioning 2 months
2. Breeding season 2-3 months
3. Post-breeding season or rest and recuperation 4-8 months

While the length of each segment may vary from one operation to another, the basic requirements during the periods 1 or 2 remain basically the same. In herds with both fall and spring breeding seasons, bulls may need a high plane of nutrition to recover body condition more quickly than if they are used just once a year.

At the start of the conditioning period, the bull battery should be fairly well established. A producer should have determined bull needs for the upcoming breeding season and then have appraised his present bull battery, in light of these needs. This evaluation should include a breeding soundness exam, which checks the reproductive capacity and physical soundness of each bull. Those bulls which prove unsatisfactory, and possibly those that are questionable, should be replaced. New bulls should be acquired at least 60 and preferably 90 days prior to the breeding season. This provides ample time for the new acquisitions to adjust to the feed and climate of an area. It also allows bulls that will be working together to become familiar with each other and to develop a social structure. Newly acquired bulls as well as the carry-overs in the bull battery should be brought up to date in a complete health program with the balance of the herd.

Proper attention and care of bulls' feet can prolong their useful life and can help insure a high rate of activity during the breeding season. After an extended period of inactivity, bull's feet may be long and misshapened. Hoof trimming should be done at the start of the conditioning period, so there is time for some re-growth which acts as a cushion during the breeding season.

One of most critical factors for proper bull development is exercise. A bull during the breeding season might be equated to an athlete since in most situations he travels several miles each day and maintains a high degree of physical activity. Physical fitness requires several weeks of conditioning. Bulls are by nature very active and become more so as the weather warms prior to the breeding season. If given ample area in bull pastures, bulls will usually exercise themselves. In designing bull facilities, it is a good idea to locate supplemental feeding and water areas as far apart as possible. Bulls that are physically fit when turned out will breed more cows during the breeding season because they will retain a high degree of libido and remain sound longer as well. Exercise prior to the breeding season also reduces injuries from fighting and riding normally occurring during that time. Read more about bull management in the OSU Fact Sheet ANSI-3254 [Management of Beef Bulls](#) .

Feeder Price Signals Reflect Changing Feeder Market Conditions

Derrell S. Peel, Oklahoma State University Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist

Feeder cattle prices have the unenviable task of providing appropriate market signals to cow-calf, stocker and feedlot producers to coordinate cattle production. This coordination is embodied in both the overall level of prices but importantly, in the relationship between prices for different weights and

classes of cattle. Feeder prices are usually lower per hundredweight for heavier animals which accounts for the normal “rollback” in price that is observed as weight is added to the animal. However, over a wide range of market conditions this rollback ranges from very severe, with large price discounts at heavier weights, to minimal rollback with little price decrease for additional weight. Historically, changes in price levels and price relationships reflected cyclically factors and markets shocks such a high feed prices.

Typically, a steep price rollback across feeder weights occurs when prices are cyclically high and numbers are low. The market is providing incentives to encourage more calf production and to speed animals into feedlots quickly. This is particularly the case when feed prices are low. The years 1991 and 2005 are good examples.

Alternatively, a flat price rollback occurs when cattle numbers are large and prices are low, thus encouraging a slower movement of animals through the system. High corn prices also cause a flat price relationship to encourage more forage based gains and reduce expensive feedlot gains. 1996 was a prime example, when cyclically low cattle prices combined with high corn prices. In fact, in this rare example, there was not a price rollback but rather a price rollup as feeder cattle gained in value as they gained weight.

The current market situation is unusual but indicative of the situation now and generally what is expected for the foreseeable future: low cattle numbers and high corn prices at the same time. There result is an unusual looking feeder price-weight relationship. Instead of a smooth downward sloping line, the current feeder price graph is kinked, with an upper portion that is steep so as the provide signals to cow-calf producers to increase calf production and a flat portion for heavy weight feeder cattle that provides a high value of gain for stocker based production. Currently there is a price rollup at some weights as prices for 750 pounds steers, for example, are higher than prices for 600 pound steers. The feeder market is simultaneously sending signals to use forage for cow-calf production and to stocker producers for additional stocker production. Forage is more valuable and forage producers have more production alternatives than we have seen in many years. Unlike previous occasions when high corn prices were usually drought related shocks, the current demand driven higher corn prices are not likely to go away and cattle numbers will remain tight for the next two to four years. We can expect the current feeder price signals to remain much as they are now as long as these conditions persist.

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