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### **Bull Breeding Soundness Exam**

Six are tested, one gets the opportunity to try again and another one fails. I'm not talking about high school geometry, although that could have a familiar ring for some, but rather herd bull breeding soundness exams. As the breeding season approaches, one of the most important decisions a cow/calf producer can make is deciding to have the herd bull battery fertility tested before the start of the breeding season.

There are a few basics that breeding herd managers should keep in mind about the bull before turning out with cows, they include passing a breeding soundness exam, maintaining appropriate body condition, and good physical shape. Remember that just because the bull has tested satisfactory in the past, he should not be considered sound year after year. This is a very economical expense, compared to the problems that can come from missed conception.

The importance of the bull in a cattle breeding program often is underestimated. A cow is responsible for half the genetic material in only one calf each year, while the bull is responsible for half the genetic material in 20 to 50 calves. The bull's ability to locate cows in estrus and breed them is vital to reproductive success. An unsound or infertile bull going into the breeding pasture undetected can cause economic hardship down the road due to open or late calving cows.

Breeding soundness exams can be done by your local veterinarian and should be performed 30 to 60 days before the bull is exposed to females. This is important to allow sufficient time to replace questionable bulls. These exams will typically include a physical examination of feet, legs, body condition, eyes and teeth, external exam of reproductive organs, scrotal circumference measurement (which correlates to daily sperm production & reproductive maturity), and proper semen evaluation for concentration, motility, and morphology.

The general health of the bull is critical since sick, aged and injured bulls are less likely to mate and usually have lower semen quality. It can be important to check the hooves of animals and take the proper measures to trim them. Sound feet and legs are very important because if found unsound, this can result in the inability to travel and mount for mating. Don't forget that it could take some time, three to six weeks, to fully recover from a trimming.

Make sure that a proper health program is followed with bulls, the same is true for the entire herd. Some of the key items are immunization and parasite control, but a complete health program should be discussed with your veterinarian. Hand in hand with health is nutrition. Body condition can be affected by length of the breeding season, grazing and supplemental feedings, number of cows expected to be serviced and distance required to travel. Ideally, bulls should have enough fat cover at the start of breeding so their ribs appear smooth across their sides, this would be a target body condition score of 6.

Any bull meeting all minimum standards for the physical exam will be classed as a "satisfactory" potential breeder. Bulls that fail any minimum standard will be given a rating of "classification deferred." This rating indicates that the bull will need another test to confirm status. Mature bulls should be retested after six weeks, and will be classified as unsatisfactory potential breeders if they fail subsequent tests. Young bulls that are just reaching puberty may be rated as "classification deferred", and then later meet all of the minimum standards. Therefore, caution should be exercised when culling based on just one breeding soundness exam.

Good producers work hard to manage their cows for high fertility, many may assume that the bulls will do their expected duties. However, it's important to pay close attention to bulls to establish successful breeding. I encourage everyone to evaluate your herd bull management program, and establish management plans to assure a successful outcome this breeding season.