

PRACTICAL BULL MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

A bull is the most important animal in your beef cattle enterprise. He makes out only 3-4% of your herd, but he contributes genetically 50% to every calf he produces. A single bull can produce 40 or more calves per year for you.

Here are some practical tips on bull management that will assist you to get the best results from your breeding bulls.

At purchase:

1. Ask the seller for the bull's pedigree certificate with EBVs, fertility certificate and DNA certificate. If it is not immediately available, arrange that it is sent to you as soon as possible.
2. If you and the seller both use BeefPro™, ask him to send you an electronic file (Animal Transfer File) with all the bull's details for you to import into BeefPro. Alternatively, download the bull's data from Logix and import it into your BeefPro.
3. Make sure the seller has all your details (name, address, telephone number, email address, and Stud Book member number, if applicable) and request him to transfer the bull as soon as possible to your name.

The new bull on your farm:

1. If the "new" bull is transported with other "foreign" bulls, it is not ideal to put the bulls together in the same compartment on a truck – especially if they are free standing – as they can fight a lot on the truck and the subordinate male cannot get away from the fighter. Thus, load foreign bulls (where possible, even bulls that know each other), preferably in separate compartments.
2. Check the bull at offloading to see if he has sustained any injuries during the transport to the farm. If necessary, treat him immediately.
3. Ensure that the bull (especially if it is a single bull) is offloaded in a secure camp (with good fences) together with a few other animals to keep him company. Clean water and good grazing (or good quality hay or roughage) will calm him down so that he can get used to the new environment sooner. Make sure he knows where water is. Leave the bull to rest for at least two days, but keep a daily eye on him to make sure that you pick up any problem that may arise immediately.
4. If it is impossible to keep the new bull apart from other bulls, make sure the camp is big enough for the younger and subordinate bull(s) to get away from the dominant bulls.

5. You can insure the bull comprehensively and/or you can tap the semen of the bull if it is special genetics. If you bring in bulls from a disease free area to an area where diseases such as heart water, red water, gall sickness etc. are endemic, rather insure the bull extensively for a year.
 6. Introduce the bull immediately to your normal dipping, dosing and vaccination program – regardless of what the previous owner did.
 7. If the bull received concentrated feed before the auction and/or if the bull is very fat, get him gradually off the concentrates. Give him, for example, 8 kg/day concentrates the first week, 4 kg/day the second week and 1 kg/day the third week with his future lick ad lib and the fourth week only his normal lick. Do not switch the bull immediately from full feed concentrates to no concentrates, because it may impair his short-term fertility.
 8. If possible, keep the new bull away from other bulls until you put him with his cows i.e. the bull should be worked for a season before he is placed in the greater bull group.
 9. Remember that a bull shed teeth between 2 and 2 ½ years of age. He could therefore lose weight if he has to adapt to his new environment, be on average grazing and still have to cover cows.
 10. Ideally the bull should arrive on the farm two months or more before the breeding season starts in order to have sufficient time to adjust to his new environment and feeding conditions.
4. Inject the bulls two months before the mating season with vitamin A and minerals (Multimin + Se + Cu). Embamin and Embavit (dosed through the mouth) are brand names that can also be used. This treatment can be repeated after about two months.
 5. The bulls' condition should always be 2.5 to 3.5 out of 5. Overfeeding leads to heavy, clumsy and unfit bulls whose semen is usually below standard. Fat deposition in the neck of the scrotum is detrimental and leads to poor thermoregulation and consequently poor semen.
 6. Malnutrition can also be a problem, but usually libido will deteriorate before semen quality is negatively affected. If bulls are somewhat slim, start giving them supplementary feeding two months before the mating season starts. This can range from a production lick to 5 - 10 kg of concentrates per bull per day.
 7. Vaccinate the bulls two months before the mating season begins against stiff-sickness and vibriosis.

During the breeding season:

Before the breeding season:

1. Important: Test all your breeding bulls for fertility, three to six weeks before the mating season begins and do sheath washes for trichomoniasis and vibriosis. In a trial in America where 10940 bulls were tested for sexual readiness, about 20% of the bulls were not suitable for use. Normally you will "lose" at least 10% bulls before each breeding season. Identify them before the mating season – the cost to do this is much less than the calves that you will lose if you did not. Test your "new" bull as well – even if he was sold with a fertility certificate – since the effect of the stress of the sale and the transportation and adjustment to his new home can influence his fertility in the short term.
 2. Even in systems where multi sire matings are used, it is essential to do semen evaluation of bulls, because dominant bulls with poor semen can keep younger bulls with good semen away from the cows.
 3. Check your bulls before the breeding season for general health and see that they are structurally normal and that their walking ability is in no way uncomfortable or abnormal.
1. Observation of your bulls, especially young bulls, during the mating season - but especially the first week or two, is very important. See if these bulls have mating prowess and whether they have libido. Young bulls are initially inexperienced but within a few days they should have mating ability. There are usually 10% bulls with low or no libido – identify these bulls and eliminate them.
 2. In multi-sire mating herds, put older and younger males together, not only bulls which are all the same age, to restrict fighting to a minimum. Put at least 3 - 4 bulls per 100 cows. For our farm it works to use one adult bull with two young bulls per 75 cows. In single sire mating herds, 30 - 40 cows should be allocated per mature bull for three months.
 3. Good observation should take place during the breeding season in order to know immediately if bulls are sick or injured. If a bull had a fever due to red water, gall sickness, lumpy skin disease, three-day stiff-sickness, etc., his semen will probably be dead and it may take two months (and even longer) before he is fertile again, as spermatogenesis (the production of new semen) takes about 65 days. Replace such a bull immediately. Foot rot during the breeding season should be treated immediately because it is a very painful condition and the bull will not mate before the foot rot has been healed. Treat such a bull with a long-acting antibiotic. Check that your bulls stay healthy during the mating season.
 4. Check carefully for injuries (especially hip, leg, hoof and penis injuries and swollen testicles) due to fighting or other reasons.

Such injuries can possibly make a bull unsuitable for mating for the remainder of the breeding season. Replace a diseased or injured bull immediately and put him in a small hospital camp near the house. In multi sire mating herds, replace the bull, if possible, with a bull of about the same age.

5. Keep record of the cows covered (bull number, cow number and servicing date). Approximately 60% of cows should conceive in their first cycle. If more than 40% cows come on heat again after their first cycle (21 days), there may be a problem and it needs to be identified and corrected as soon as possible. If the problem occurs in a specific single sire mating herd, replace the bull immediately. If the problem occurs in a specific multi sire mating herd, it may be possible that a dominant bull is infertile or has another problem. Try to identify this bull and replace him immediately.
6. Mating groups should not be in camps next to each other. Bulls fight through the fence and a bull with good libido will break through an ordinary wire fence to get to a cow on heat. With two year old and younger bulls you may still take a chance when the wire fence is very good.

After the breeding season:

1. Starve the bulls in separate strong pens for three to four days (without food or water). Then take the bulls one by one to the bull camp where good pasture and clean water is freely available. Bulls in these circumstances should forget about the cows and should also be more likely to eat than fight. The bull camp must also be safe without too many stones, trenches and holes. There must be enough space for bulls to avoid each other.
2. The ideal is to place bulls in pairs (one older and one younger) in a camp and not all together in one camp. Especially valuable bulls should be kept separate. In practice, however, it happens that bulls must be put together and then the owner cannot do much more than close his eyes and hope for as few as possible injuries.
3. The bull camp can be made safe by putting up double fences (3 meters apart) on the sides where cattle are in adjacent camps. Electric fences can also help, although more after care is required.
4. Allow adequate feeding space at the troughs or when limited supplement feeding is given, as bulls fight more and more "personal" space is needed. Between 0.5m and 1m feeding space per bull should be sufficient. Inside-out truck or tractor tires are good troughs – they are indestructible and cannot hurt the bulls when they fight.

5. When working with a bull group, make sure that they are not chased into a bunch (close together), as they usually fight under such circumstances. Bulls that accepted each other for months, can suddenly start fighting when they are moved around – the so-called "displacement behaviour".
6. Do not run the bulls with the dairy cows or with another cow between mating seasons. The bulls can, by mating the same cow, get infected with venereal diseases.

General comments:

1. For every ten bulls you use it is advisable to reserve a bull for bulls that may get sick or injured or must be replaced during the breeding season for other reasons.
2. Bulls from most medium framed breeds can be used as early as age 14 months if they weigh at least 420kg, their scrotum circumference is at least 340mm and their semen tested positive. These young bulls should be able to cover 10-20 cows in three months.
3. Normally bulls can be used until ten years of age. Older bulls can also be used, but then special observation is needed to see if the bulls still work well.
4. Adult bulls of medium frame weigh about 800 - 1000kg, i.e. at least 1.5 to 2 LSU. Keep this in mind for the size of your bull camp.
5. Enjoy your bull – in 90% of the cases you should have no problems.

