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Middle of the Calving Season: *Think About the Breeding Season*

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At the University of Minnesota North Central Research and Outreach Center, calving is in full swing. Through estrous synchronization and timed artificial insemination, we are having 6-10 calving events every day. While dealing with these calving events, it is impossible not to think about next year's calving season, and calving next year starts with breeding this year. Many of the questions that arise revolve around the bulls.

When you are preparing your bulls for the breeding season, it is very important for you to make sure that your bulls are in good body condition. Young bulls, as with heifers, need to be in better condition than older bulls. A body condition score (BCS) of 5.5-6.5 is best for bulls that are expected to work through the summer months. If a bull goes into the breeding season thin, he won't have the energy and body stores to service all of the cows during peak breeding. However, a fat bull will often be too lazy to get cows serviced, either. When purchasing a bull, be sure that you know what he was fed to get to the condition that he is currently in, and keep in mind the feed availability and work load that he will have while he's breeding cows.

When purchasing a bull, evaluation of breeding goals are a must. Your intentions and plans for calves out of your bulls will dictate the traits that you should be selecting for. If you are interested only in selling pounds of calf in the fall, weaning weight performance is very important. If you feed out your own calves, or have them custom fed in a feedlot, yearling and carcass traits should be important to you. If you retain females for replacement out of your herd bull, it would behoove you to keep track of the maternal traits of your bulls. Many times, producers will purchase the cheapest bulls that they can find, but those bulls are nothing but "cow-fresheners." There is no advantage in marketing of those calves. Performance is unknown, carcass quality is unknown, longevity is unknown, and there is no hope for genetic advancement with a cheap, poorer quality bull.

When establishing breeding goals, it is important to stick to the goals and program that you decided to pursue, for more than a year or two. If you purchase a bull today, intending to keep replacements, it will be three years before his daughters will be having their own calves, and that will be your first opportunity to evaluate his genetic potential. Typically, producers will only keep a bull for 2 years, and thus may miss an opportunity to capitalize on a quality maternal sire. By the same token, if you purchase a bull with the intention of improving carcass traits, you will have to wait two years before you can see how his calves perform on the rail.

It is often difficult for a producer to justify having a breeding soundness exam performed on their older bulls year after year. He bred cows last year, so he should breed cows this year, right? Sometimes that is not the case. In this region of the country, environment can have significant impacts on bull fertility. If we have a very cold winter, and the bulls have insufficient shelter, there is a good chance that they experienced some cold

injury to their testicles. Thermal injury may not be manifested as infertility immediately after the insult, and recovery from the insult may require a minimum of 45 days before the bull is back to normal sperm production. Evaluation of semen samples from a breeding soundness exam will help determining the bull's potential for fertility. Sperm cell defects are classified according to the stage of develop of when the defect occurred, and can help determine the prognosis for recovery.

A complete breeding soundness exam does not simply evaluate a semen sample. Much of the bull's reproductive tract is also palpated and/or evaluated visually. Problems with old injuries and scarring can be found and dealt with appropriately at that time, instead of after the cows are recycling because the bull's not getting his job done. It is also important to evaluate the entire bull during the breeding soundness exam. His body condition score, lameness score, eye health, etc., are all important when determining if a bull can be called a satisfactory breeder or not.

We are required by law to have car insurance to drive. We have health insurance, in case of an injury or illness. Why not have an insurance policy on the bulls. A breeding soundness exam is precisely that. An annual premium of $35-$50/hd is pretty cheap insurance for the extra calf weights that you would be losing because your herd bull wasn't working. If you notice that cows are cycling back after bull exposure, the next calving season will be set back about 42 days. On weaned calves gaining approximately 2 pounds per day, there is a potential loss of 84 lbs of weaning weight per calf, and on 100 calves, that's 8400 lbs. If you are trying to hit the peak markets, that could be lost revenue of up to $10,000 (if calf prices are around $1.20/cwt). By the same token, if you choose to wean your calves later to allow them to put on more weight, you will be missing peak calf prices, and again, see losses in revenue. On top of lower calf weights, you will also have an uphill battle to get your cows back to your scheduled breeding season. So, a little insurance can go a long way.

So, while you are doing your midnight checks and pulling calves out of cows that want to kill you, start thinking about the bulls you want to use, how you are going to prepare them for their summer job, and what you want them to accomplish in your herd.

For additional information about this or other beef related topics, please visit the Beef Team website at www.extension.umn.edu/beef.