

Winter Management and Nutrition for Bulls

By Heather Smith Thomas

SALMON, Idaho: Traditionally bulls have been confined during winter and fed grain as well as hay, but some producers are wintering their bulls at pasture, letting them grow or maintain mature weight under more natural conditions, which often leads to better health, fertility and longevity.

Arron Nerbas of Nerbas Brothers

Angus, near Shellmouth, in western Manitoba, said their breeding program emphasizes forage-based genetics, and focuses primarily on maternal traits. "Our goal is to make better cows long-term. We sell bulls, but producing bulls is not what drives our genetic decisions. We are primarily trying to make better cows, on our own operation," he said.

"We are often asked if we sell

any heifer bulls, but there's no such thing as a heifer bull in our program. Our goal is for every bull to be capable of producing a high quality female that has the potential to be a productive cow. Generally, heifer bulls are selected to ensure calving ease as top priority above any other traits and in most cases that calf will not be retained in the herd as a female. This does not serve our goal very well," said Nerbas.

Theirs is mainly a commercial operation, with a smaller herd of purebred cows. They run 600 cows total, and the commercial cows are straight-bred Angus, but not papered.

"Our purpose for the small group of registered cows is to create our own bulls for use on the commercial herd. We have not purchased an outside animal for more than 20 years. We use artificial insemination to bring in new bloodlines that complement what we are doing. As a by-product of making our own bulls, we sell some bulls to other ranchers, selling about 60 bulls each year. About 10% of those are purebreds because we have more numbers than what we can use for ourselves, and 90% are commercial bulls. They are not papered, have no parent verification, and no numbers behind them. Our EPDs are just our cow herd."

The cows, and what they produce, are proof enough of what these bulls will do. "Over the years

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Monoculture Crop

Continued from p. 13

So how do you get away from the monoculture? Your perennial polyculture is the most natural crop we have, but I am not saying we need to put an end to grain farming. We still need it, but there is lots of work being done on cover crops, inter cropping, perennial grains and poly crops. You just need to Google it. Developing a good rotation of polycultures that can be harvested with limited tillage or limited chemicals is not out of the question. They are even working with zero-till organic systems now using a roller-crimper.

We also need to integrate livestock back onto the land. The Crop Rejuvenation Application Process from livestock is very important to building a healthy

soil. I know this article might offend some producers and I do apologize. I just wanted to make a point that when we try to out compete nature, it just costs us in the long run. Next time you drive by a field and criticize your neighbor, remember, a polyculture is pretty, it is the monoculture that is ugly!

God Bless. ■

Steve Kenyon ranches in Busby, Alberta, Canada, and can be reached at skenyon@greenerpastureranching.com. Www.greenerpasturesranching.com or on Facebook at Greener Pastures Ranching. He will be presenting Canadian SGF Business Schools with Joel Salatin this month and in February in Denver. See the insert for details.

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we have targeted our marketing toward the people who appreciate what we are doing and are like-minded." If a rancher has grass-based genetics and wants a bull that provides forage efficiency and good maternal traits, these bulls work well.

"They provide good maternal influence, and calving ease. All of our genetics are suitable for breeding heifers. If a person is not trying for extremes in growth, and other traits that are antagonistic to maternal traits, all bulls should be heifer bulls," said Nerbas.

The Nerbas bulls are developed a little differently than most seedstock operations. "We calve in May and wean the first week of December. This is a little on the early side for weaning (calves are six to seven months old) but we like to wean at that time so the calves are off the cows and the cows can go to bale grazing. The cows bale graze for several months, starting mid-December until mid-April," he said.

"When those bulls are weaned about seven months old they go to their own big pasture. We don't keep anything in a corral," he said.



The young bulls go to a wintering site after weaning and are fed good quality hay, and no grain. "We roll out the hay for them, usually a few days' feed at a time, and some straw for bedding to protect them from the elements and prevent scrotal frostbite. Those young bulls gain between 1 and 1.5 pounds per day through their first winter. Some people would say this slow rate of growth is detrimental to their long-

term development, but we feel the opposite is true. As long as you are not in a hurry to use that bull for breeding waiting until he's a two-year-old rather than a yearling works very well." The two-year-old has had time to grow into what he needs to be.

"Some Angus breeders have yearling bulls that weigh 1400 pounds, and our bulls are nowhere near that size, but we are looking

at the big picture and how long our bulls will last in the breeding herd. When our young bulls come off their wintering site they stay in their group when they go to pasture. We always try to keep them together the whole time they are growing up, and don't introduce any new animals. This helps reduce fighting. We don't want them chasing each other and fighting; we just want them eating grass and growing," said Nerbas.

"Each group has their own pasture for the summer, and we select pastures that are better quality for the young growing bulls and they grow very well. In the fall when we bring them home, usually in November, we put them on good quality hay," he explained.

"We sell them starting in February, through April - just under two years of age," he said. By that time they are ready to go to work and can breed a lot more cows and last a lot longer than yearlings that were pushed to get to "sale weight" as yearlings.

"The downside is that our bulls last too long! Our customers don't

Continued on p. 16



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Winter Management

Continued from p. 15

have to come back very soon, so it's good and bad! They are not buying a bull nearly as often, but this is actually better for our customers," said Nerbas.

"With our own bulls, going forward after two years of age, they winter as a group and we just feed good-quality hay and sometimes a little bit of green feed or a little slough hay. They are on range pasture and do fine. The following spring when the grass is green, they really bloom before the breeding season and are ready to go to work.

WINTERING MATURE BULLS

Grant Lastiwka, Livestock and Forage Business Specialist, Alberta Agriculture, said older bulls that just need maintenance rations during winter can easily become too fat and heavy over winter especially if they are efficient cattle that do well on forage. "They need to be out exercising, not confined. We run our bulls out with the cows during winter, and they stay fit and not fat."

This is a good way to manage bulls, if the cows are all pregnant

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(any open ones have already been sold) and there are no young heifers in the group. The bulls get the exercise they need, and have adequate feed, eating the same feed as the pregnant cows. There is usually very little fighting among those bulls because there is no breeding going on, and the pecking order has already been sorted out.

Bulls need enough groceries to grow and develop properly. "As they

get older, however, their requirements are just for maintenance and adequate body condition when they go out to breed. Ours go out August 10 so they've had most of the summer to graze. Older bulls can get very fat, which is a challenge," he said.

Winter feed will depend on their condition. "Some of the younger bulls may start winter in poor condition if they've been breeding cows all fall, and maybe shedding teeth,

which happens at about two years of age when baby teeth are shed, and permanent teeth are coming in, and not eating as well."

How you feed them during winter depends on how many bulls you have, their ages and condition. "Often bulls simply need a maintenance ration. This can be provided with stockpiled forages, swath grazing, bale grazing etc. Often they can do very well in winter out in big pastures," said Lastiwka.

Some seedstock producers are trying to raise bulls in conditions similar to what they will experience in their customers' herds. This means being out in large pastures, getting exercise. "Winter nutrition should be geared toward making sure they are prepared for the job. Bulls that are grazed, rotationally moved and managed like the cow herd are also more comfortable with people and are easier to handle." ■

Heather Smith Thomas ranches in Salmon, Idaho and is the author of Horse Tales, Cow Tales, and Ranch Tales available at heather-smiththomas.blogspot.com

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