

What Your Bull Needs to Know Before Heading Out to Pasture

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Just kidding. If your bull doesn't know what he's doing by now, you should probably get rid of him. However, there are a few things you can do to help your bull do his job well this season and there are good reasons to do so. In addition to making calving season a little more predictable, high success rates in the first estrous cycle can also improve your cash return: one estimate suggests a loss of 50-60 pounds at weaning weight for every 21-day cycle of delayed conception.

One of the first things a rancher wants to be aware of is how many cows one bull can service. A rule of thumb is that a bull can handle the same number of cows as he is months old, up to 50 months of age. So, a yearling bull of 15 months should be able to service 15 cows in a 65 day cycle.

It is important that bulls go into the pasture in good condition. An appropriate winter feeding program aims for a moderate body condition of 3 to 3.5 at breeding time. According to researchers at the University of Lethbridge, Angus and Hereford bulls conditioned on a high energy diet had lower testes weight, reduced sperm production and lower epididymal sperm reserves in comparison to those fed a medium energy diet of forage alone. While bulls do need energy reserves to graze and look for cows over a large area, excess fat in the neck of the scrotum warms up the testes, killing sperm. So, spring buyers should look for a slim bull or buy a yearling and then grow the bull, rather than fatten it, for subsequent breeding. However, it is also important to make sure the pasture is adequate to maintain condition, particularly for yearling bulls who are still growing.

Bulls should be assessed on three additional things before you depend on them to do their job well: libido or sex drive, physical soundness and semen quality. Libido can only be observed by the herd owner while the bull is in with the cows. Just make sure he is showing interest in the cows and can perform. Reassess periodically to make sure the bull has not sustained any injuries.

For physical soundness and semen quality, a veterinarian can offer a breeding soundness evaluation. The vet will make sure your bull has sound feet and is free of conditions such as corkscrew claw, corns, weak pasterns, post leggedness and sickle hocks. Bulls need this soundness in order to mount, but these characteristics are also hereditary and can be passed on to offspring, reducing herd health. The vet will also inspect the bull for any injuries and penile deviations and assess sperm motility and sperm morphology. Finally the veterinarian will likely recommend the bull be vaccinated with a modified live IBR/BVD vaccine and an 8-way clostridial vaccine at least three weeks before breeding.

It is important that all assessments take place 30 to 60 days before the bulls enter the pasture. It takes between 4 to 6 weeks for a bull to produce sperm cells, so an early evaluation will give you enough time to address the problem and for the bull to replace lost or damaged cells.

While 50% is the average conception rate in the first cycle, with these management tips and a healthy bull, farmers have achieved up to 70% or even better.

Q: What did the bull say to the cow?

A: When I fall in love, it will be for heifer!

EVENTS

Pasture Walks

June

Grant Lastiwka from Alberta Agriculture will join us for three days in June to discuss all things grazing! How does a healthy pasture put money in your pocket? Attend to find out!

June 14th
These Farm
County of Northern Lights

June 15th Johnson Farm MD of Fairview

Lentz Farm Clear Hills County

June 16th Vanherk Farm Clear Hills County

10:30am-3:30pm 6:00pm-10:00pm (Lentz's)

\$25/member, \$40/farm pair \$30/non-member, \$45/farm

Contact: Karlah (780) 523-4033 and register today!

SAVE THE DATE!!Western Canadian Grazing
Conference
November 27-29, 2012
Red Deer, AB



Eat Pastured Pork! Or, as your grandparents called it, pork

There has been a lot of buzz going around lately about pastured pork. The thing about pigs, however, is that they are omnivorous and will eat whatever they can find. So, the term is really a misnomer. A pastured pig is one that has been raised outdoors with free access to water and shelter. Similar to the typical cow on pasture, pastured pigs graze within a paddock or field. So, they exercise as often as they like and forage on grass, forbs, trees, roots, fungus, detritus and whatever else they sniff out. In addition, pastured pigs often get a supplement of grain, pulses or oilseeds. In the pre-industrial farmscape, these critters were fed kitchen scraps and excess milk and whey.

So, what's driving this new – I guess I should say old – trend in pork? You guessed it: many eaters and increasingly farmers and ranchers are none too pleased with modern industrial animal operations. The complaints are so numerous it's hard to choose just one. Briefly, eaters are saying they don't want barn-raised pork because they think the animal has an inherent right to see sunshine and run around at will. Many urban eaters say they would like a closer relationship with their food provider. Concerns about human health also play a role. Many reports have found that pastured meats contain higher overall levels of conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), stearic acid



and a higher ratio of omega 3 to 6 fatty acids. These are all the 'good fats' that are considered beneficial to human health.

Finally, there are the environmental concerns. While manure from industrial barns can be a natural input to agricultural fields, there are issues with nutrient loading, particularly in regions prone to flooding and rapid run-off events. The most notorious water pollution case occurred in North Carolina after Hurricane Floyd swept through in the fall of 1999 with the end estimates suggesting that 250 hog operations and 38 lagoons flooded out, killing 30,000 hogs and washing 250 million gallons of pig waste into creeks, rivers and wetlands.

Farmers and ranchers cite many of these same concerns. After all, they are eaters too. In addition, many of these food providers say they would like to see a more decentralized approach to slaughtering and processing with more facilities located in smaller communities. These farmers suggest that a local economy for meat combined with a direct market relationship with urban eaters would contribute to rural economic development, allow farmers to capture a greater market share and provide a desirable livelihood to young farmers.

Food bloggers such as Jo Robinson of eatwild.com, organizations like the Weston A. Price Foundation and authors like the radical farmer Joel Salatin are doing a lot to promote both the production and consumption of pastured meats. Most recently, a researcher with the Agricultural Research Program at North Carolina A&T placed 27 Ossabaw pigs with farmers who raised them on wooded and pastured lots with supplements of peanuts, acorns and alfalfa. Preliminary results suggest a 15% increase in monounsaturated fats (good fat!) in the adipose tissue of these pigs. On a scale of 1 to 9, meat from these pigs scored from 7.3 to 8.3 in colour, tenderness and flavour, compared to meat from a confinement operation, which scored from 5.6 to 6.2. Perhaps most importantly to anyone considering getting into the business of pasturing pork, this same report suggests farmers can net \$1,000 per sow per year using a pastured pork model.

Whether your market is haute cuisiners, upscale restaurants or simply individuals and families wanting to access pastured meats, it certainly seems that pastured pork is taking off. Brace yourselves. The locavores are coming, and they've got a big appetite.

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