

Off-Season Herd Bull Management

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What can you say about off-season herd bull management that could not be covered in 3-4 sentences? You take the bull away from the cows at the end of the breeding season, put him in a separate pasture and put him back with the cows next year. Sounds simple enough.

I really believe bulls were born to tear up things --- gates, mineral feeders, fences, pick-up trucks, etc. If bulls were such easy critters to manage, I bet we would have a whole lot fewer producers running the bull year round with the cow herd. No off-season herd bull management problems there...because there is no off-season.

We could write a whole other article on the benefits of a controlled breeding season. That's not at issue here. But, it can't happen till you manage the bull separately. And to be honest with you, housing the bull off to himself is a problem for a lot of producers.

Where do you begin? More than anything else, fencing is probably the limiting factor. A "well-fenced" pasture is a must. And that means different things to different folks. But it basically suggests whatever is necessary to keep him in and away from the cows. Some bulls require no more than a few strands of barbed wire; other respect only a "hot" wire. Probably the ideal set-up is a total electric enclosure or woven wire with a strand of hot wire on the inside. Neither is an inexpensive proposition, but if you are going to construct a bull pasture, do it right the first time. Some producers I know do very well with minimum fencing if the bull pasture is out of sight and smell of other cattle or cows, which brings up the question -- Does a bull need company? I don't know. We don't tend to give much thought to their psychological health. Bulls seem to do equally well housed in groups or by themselves. Since they are herd animals, I am sure they prefer company if they can get it. If not another bull, maybe you have an old pet cow or a steer destined for the freezer you could put with him.

I hope wherever you put your bull during the off-season, you have taken into consideration natural shelter and a clean, fresh water supply. The bull will require shade. A clump of trees or manmade cover works equally well. While a single tree in the middle of a wide open pasture may provide shade, it is also a lightning rod. Not a good idea.

Clean, fresh water is a must. If you can furnish it from a well, that would be ideal. A live stream or creek is okay too. How about a pond? That is my least favorite option for a lot of reasons, but if that is your only choice then go with it. Consider fencing the pond out and watering from it via a pipe to a stock tank.

What about feed? Good quality pasture is sufficient for most bulls two years and older coming out of the breeding pasture, but the yearling bull coming off his first breeding season will no doubt require some extra feed to get him back on the mend. He has been preoccupied with other matters and so he will probably be a little on the thin side. Giving him one to 1-1/2% of his body weight in grain daily will do wonders. When you are satisfied he has picked up enough, taper him off and good pasture should see him through the summer and fall. Don't forget about minerals. Let him have free choice access to a loose livestock mineral, preferably one with a 2:1 ratio for calcium to phosphorus. Put it in a "bull proof" feeder. (Do they make such a thing?) I have seen a lot of homemade ones -- probably one of the best was an old skidder tire made so it could roll no more than one revolution and could not be tipped over.

Make sure the bull gets his annual vaccination for the respiratory diseases, clostridials, leptospirosis and vibrio. A good deworming once a year is in order and treat for grubs and lice, too. How about fly control? Horn flies by the thousands take up residence on the bull during the summer. If the bull(s) is/are fairly isolated from other cattle, the larvacide stomach bolus would be the method of choice. Pop'em in when you remove him from the cows and that should be control for 4-5 months. If that's not feasible, then fly tags. There are other remedies -- namely, dusts and pour-ons. But if they have to be applied every day or two that is not very feasible. Let the bulls treat themselves if you can.

I guess the most important chore you have during the off-season is the BSE (breeding soundness exam). I cannot imagine turning the bull in with the cows without first checking out his reproductive capabilities each year. The stakes are too high. However, I know there are too few producers doing it. It can't be because cost of the exam is too high...it is only \$35-\$50 in our area. That's a lot less than losing a calf crop. Maybe it is because there are not many large animal vets providing the service. I doubt it. Again, in my area this is not a problem. It can be done on your farm (you need electricity and water at the corral site) or at the vet clinic. I prefer the latter.

Around here, there are several BSE clinics held seasonally ahead of the breeding season. The BSE also takes into account soundness of feet and legs. Maybe your bull is a candidate for a foot trimming to correct a problem. That can be done, too. Is the bull's eyesight important? Very! Bulls see heat activity -- cows attempting to ride each other -- then they go investigate. During the BSE the vet will look for eye problems. The BSE checks everything but libido (sex drive). You have to monitor that when you put the bull with the cows. His equipment may be in working order but if he lacks the desire he is of no value.

Off-season herd-sire management does not have to be a major task. It may seem annoying, but if you take care of your bull, he'll take care of you!

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