

The Cost of Not Testing the Bull

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The cow-calf business is an intricate business with many moving parts. Some of the moving parts are constantly in motion while others are seasonal in nature. For instance, some producers have a defined breeding season which results in a defined calving season and thus a seasonal moving part. Other producers leave the bull with the cow herd year round and thus have an undefined calving season that envelops the year and is constantly in motion.

Staying on a similar subject, the viability of a bull and his role in a cow-calf operation are integral to the survivability of a herd and he is constantly in motion. This time of year, many producers have calves already on the ground or some hitting the ground and are preparing for breeding season. With breeding season here, it is time to have the veterinarian perform a Breeding Soundness Evaluation (BSE) on the herd sire. Many people reading this article have already had their veterinarian perform a BSE while others have plans in the near future. However, there are some who would argue it cost too much to haul the bull to town and then pay someone to perform the evaluation or others claim they do not have the time to haul the bull to town and he did fine last year anyway. The two questions that come to mind to challenge such arguments are 1) if a BSE cost too much then how much does it cost to not sell any calves next fall and 2) if there is not enough time to haul the bull to town for a BSE then how much time is available next spring to watch a herd of open cows not calve?

The bull makes up half of every mating opportunity and thus he is necessary to produce a calf. It is integral that he is physically sound and fertile to improve the odds of conception. An infertile bull can cost an entire calf crop. The cost associated with no calves to market due to infertility is the cost of carrying those cows for a full year plus the opportunity cost associated with the resources used on the cattle herd that likely could have been devoted to something else with a positive return.

An infertile bull can cost a small fortune depending on the size of the cattle herd, but a subfertile bull can also cost a producer a pretty penny. The subfertile bull can cost a producer in two ways. The first way he costs a producer is by a reduced conception and calving rate. The second way the subfertile bull costs a producer is in the way of pounds at weaning if he failed to settle a cow during her first heat cycle. If we consider an operation with 30 cows the difference between a 90 percent calf crop (27 calves) with a fertile bull and an 80 percent calf crop (24 calves) with a subfertile bull would result in 3 fewer calves from the subfertile bull. If those three additional calves from the fertile bull weighed 525 pounds at weaning and brought \$194 per hundredweight then they would be worth \$1,018.50 a head for a total of \$3,055.50.

However, the story does not end there. Even if a subfertile bull settles the cows later in the season, it can cost a producer because cows bred in the first heat cycle will typically wean heavier calves than cattle settled in the second or third heat cycle. If we assume the average weaning weight of calves from the subfertile bull was 500 pounds as opposed to 525 pounds from the fertile bull then we would have 25 fewer pounds per head to market. Assuming a 500 pound calf brought \$200 per hundredweight then each calf would be worth \$1,000. Twenty-four calves worth \$1,000 a head results in total revenue of \$24,000 while 27 calves worth \$1,018.50 a head results in total revenue of \$27,499.50. Thus the fertile bull returned nearly \$3,500 more than the subfertile bull. The use of a subfertile bull could result in a much lower calf crop percentage than used in this example which would cost a producer even more. So the question is, “can a producer afford not to have a BSE performed on the bull?”

The economic benefits associated with the decision to have the bull tested before the start of the breeding season seems to be fairly straight forward for producers with a defined breeding season. But, how do producers with a continuous breeding season evaluate this decision? The answer is to transition the herd to a defined breeding and calving season! Many factors can influence a bull's ability to breed and it can be difficult to keep an eye on the bull for 365 days a year. When the cows are exposed to the bull year round then it becomes difficult to determine if the reproductive inefficiency is with the cow or if it is with the bull. Producers may have the bull tested a certain time every year but his fertility may be impacted in some manner during the year which renders him unable to settle cows. Producers would recognize this inability at some point, but the producer with a continuous breeding season would have to determine first if the bull is the problem or if the cow has the reproductive inefficiency. An inefficiency associated with a bull would likely be recognized more quickly in a herd with a defined breeding season. Thus, the moral of the story is to have a BSE performed on all bulls before every breeding season and work to establish a defined breeding season if one is not currently in place.