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Time to Retire the Sire?

The Shorthorn herd bulls northwest of Bern have been pulled off the spring calving cows and they now stand across the fence bellowing at each other, trying to see who is the dominate male. I've tried running bulls together in the past, but always fear that in the fight for dominance, injury will occur. It's crossed my mind that it would simply be easier to sell these vocalizing, testosterone pumping, facility destroyers and replace them with new bulls each year, but is that logical? Often a lot of time, research and money goes into buying a herd bull, so it only makes sense that the desire is to maximize the bull investment, but there are good reasons to retire sires after the breeding season.

The physical demand placed on bulls to service the cow herd generally allows them to have a useful life somewhere around five years after reaching full service capacity. Yes, those seven plus year-old bulls can still be breeders, but the work load they are asked to accomplish can take a toll. Mounting and breeding cows in all sorts of terrain, working in mud, sand, rocks, snow, potentially fighting with other bulls and the natural service of each female could lead to injury of feet, legs and sex organs. Over time, even the soundest and most athletic bulls are going get injured, become difficult or unsafe to have around and this may lead to potentially failing a breeding soundness exam.

In addition to the physical soundness of the bull, there is also the genetic potential to evaluate as well. As a sire's progeny come into production, true genetic merit is often best realized. This might be measured in weaning weights, carcass traits or material abilities of daughters. It takes years to be fully expressed, so if the physical aspects allow, most bulls persist in the herd for several seasons to be progeny tested. However, as a result of successful selection programs in the purebred seedstock industry, younger bulls purchased as yearlings next spring will very likely will have a genetic advantage over older bulls, as nearly every breed has evidence of improving genetic trends in their populations. The balancing act becomes using proven accuracy versus potential performance enhancement.

Bulls in a spring calving cow herd are currently "off-duty" for the next 6-8 months. If a bull weighs 2,000 pounds and eats 2.5% of his body weight in forage dry matter hay each day, that is a daily intake of 50 pounds. For the sake of simple math, let's use 200 days for the bull to be eating hay without working. He will consume about 5 ton of forage dry matter. If his nutritional requirements will be met with hay valued at \$120/ton that is \$600 in feed cost occurred between now and turn-out next spring. The other real cost involved in this discussion, is the salvage value of the bull. The current USDA Market Report for Kansas this week indicates a salvage value of approximately \$1.55 per pound for average quality bulls or roughly \$3,100 for the 2,000-pound bull used in this example.

Assess the genetic merit, physical condition and ages of existing herd bulls; along with current feed costs. Culling older or lower performing herd bulls now and re-populating with young bulls next spring can add long-term genetic advantages beyond just the savings realized in winter feed bills. The salvage value plus the savings in feed cost should cover a sizable portion (*\$3,700 in our example*) of investing in younger, likely genetically superior bulls in the spring. All of this needs to be considered as you evaluate keeping a bull another year. If the operation utilizes multiple breeding seasons, bulls might have more opportunity to be better utilized changing the math a bit, but the prior exercise still has utility at any time.