

BeefTalk: Plan Now for May and June Bull Turnout

Typical Bull Turnout Dates	
North Dakota Cattle Improvement Association	
January through April	4%
May	32%
June	58%
July through September	6%

Producers should be encouraged to use the programs with the highest success records.

Typical Bull Turnout Dates

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It's that time of year, which is bull time. Many producers are thinking it's calving time, but calving time is a function of bull time. In other words, having healthy, good bulls ready for turnout in the spring is critical for next year's calving time.

As producers, there is no time in the year when one can quit thinking. Efficient operations always require plenty of forethought. What one is doing today is simply a reflex of yesterday's planning, and today's planning will bring tomorrow's reflex. That may sound complicated, but progressive cattle producers are used to it.

The North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association processes beef records for many producers. Although most of the producers reside in North Dakota, many are from other parts of the United States. These producers have a very standard bull turnout portfolio that translates into bull time.

In reviewing the bull turnout dates for the first nine months of the year since 1998, 4 percent turned bulls out in April or earlier, 32 percent turned bulls out in May, 58 percent turned bulls out in June and 6 percent turned bulls out from July through September.

The number of producers turning bulls out to cows the last three months of the year is insignificant in this set of producers. There is an obvious producer season-of-the-year thought process that goes into bull turnout. The average turnout date in June was June 14 or 15. If one assumes midnight June 15 as the bull turnout date, the calves should arrive 283 days later on March 25.

If one looks at the two main months that cattle are bred, bulls that are turned out on May 1 will sire calves that will arrive on Feb. 8. Those that turn bulls out on June 30 will sire calves that should arrive on April 19. Therefore, seasonal calf marketing is an obvious side effect of bull turnout dates as well because most of the calves will be weaned in mid to late fall with appropriate feedlot placement.

The cattle business is a seasonal, cyclical business tied to the rise of cool spring grasses and early summer forage. These calves typically grow at a rate of more than 2.5 pounds per day throughout the summer grazing and nursing time. Meanwhile, more than 93.5 percent of the mother cows will be breeding for a promising calf crop next year.

Given the decreasing cow numbers and adequate feeding capacity in feed yards, this scenario will not change much. There also is increasing pressure to grow bigger, more efficient calves that will hang more meat on the rail. The dynamics of when ownership will pass from breeder to feeder may vary slightly. However, demand and feedlot space will favor calves that are large enough to offer both the breeder and feeder a reasonable opportunity to stay in the cattle business.

Sorry for the side thought because this article started out talking about the bull. The point is, for all these great things to happen in the beef business, the bull is the key. Selecting the proper bulls, astutely paying attention to the desired expected progeny differences (EPDs) and managing the bull for the appropriate conditions to enter into the cow pasture are critical.

Unsound, overconditioned bulls will drop a desired calving date back, and genetically inferior bulls will produce calves that also are genetically inferior. As a good rule of thumb, bull selection should start with a good understanding of the desired breed and the breed association's EPDs. Producers should pay particular attention to the percentile trait rankings for the desired bulls.

Spending money on low-ranked bulls, even though bulls that rank in the upper 50 percentile of the breed are available for similar dollars, is hard to justify. Unless there is a specific selection direction one is trying to achieve, stay with above-average ranked bulls. Once home, slowly adapt the bulls from their developmental nutritional plan to a ration that will make the transition to pasture easy and with no nutritional setbacks.

Don't forget that every day a bull does not feel well, 4 to 5 percent of the cows will miss a cycle.

That's expensive.

May you find all your ear tags.