

BeefTalk 512: Roaming Bulls Are a Brute Force

Bulls tend to develop a mind of their own.

After months spent developing the right grazing system, building good fences, buying the right bulls, selecting the best cows and matching one's resources to the best calving season, all the learning and preparation is ready to be executed.

It's good to be in the beef business. However, like many things in life, things do not always go as planned. In fact, some of the best-laid plans end up in the garbage and bring new meaning to short-term response.

Realizing that the bulls did not read the planning manual is a typical and not that uncommon situation after all the long-term efforts are put in place. The bottom line is that the bull won't stay in the pasture. If there isn't a bull, there will not be calves. With no calves, why is one in the beef business?

Upon checking the pastures, a new bull had taken up residency. This bull was not the one that was supposed to be in the pasture. So where is the high-priced bull one bought last spring? The search begins and ends with the bull retrieved and returned, but it does not take much cowhand logic to realize the right bull has no intention of staying home. Also, the wrong bull kind of likes the cows in his newfound home, so frustration wins the day.

The beef business is complicated and there are many costs associated with the industry that often are overlooked. One such is the cost of the roaming bull, as I was reminded of the other day. There actually are two columns for this cost that depend on whether your bull visited the neighbor's cows or if the neighbor's bull visited your cows. Either way creates frustration for producers because simple remedies are not always available.

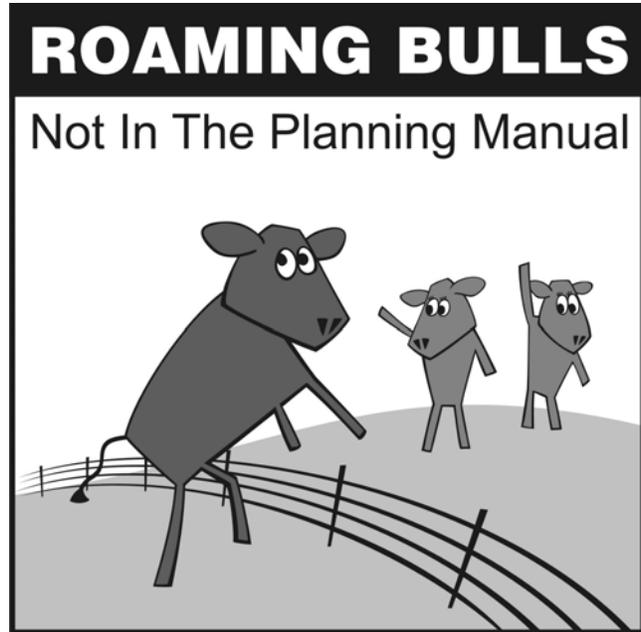
Bulls tend to develop a mind of their own. Although most seem content and willing to stay behind even a reasonable fence, some develop a unique ability to roam. Even a tight fence can slowly be worked loose as a bull diligently places first the nose and then each foot meticulously through the fence while managing to avoid even the sharpest barb.

For some bulls, if time is more important, they simply may choose to jump. For others, it may be a gate or post that has a little give to it. Either way, some bulls seem to develop an uncanny ability to roam. This brings on increased frustration because so much preparation time seems to fall in the waste paper basket.

Perhaps, in many circles, the problem with roaming bulls is increasing because there is an increased desire among some producers to move their calving season later. Obviously that means the cows will be on pasture without a bull, which is a difficult scenario. For some, bulls seem to have a keen sense for open cows and some just don't seem to be content with their own herd, so they wander.

The thought is good, but the reality of trying to maintain a set of open cows within proximity of a bull is challenging. It seems so simple during the winter meeting to plan breeding times. One allocates pastures and breeding times so more calves may be available for market throughout the year rather than the seasonal peak. Feedlots could manage their inventory better and processing companies would be pleased with the more consistent supply.

In many respects, cow-calf producers could pick and choose calving times that would blend well with their other enterprises. The only problem is that bulls don't read. Bulls operate on brute response. If an open cow is in the neighborhood and the cow is in estrus, the bull will breed her.



People and bulls have a mutual understanding. People build fences, while bulls remove fences. Granted, not all bulls are brutes and fences can be reinforced and then reinforced again. However, the fact remains that bulls really only have one function, which is to breed cows. They do that well.

If during the process neighbors are reunited for the common good, that is good, too. In the end, the beef business is a large business literally woven together by a few rusty wires. The business is extremely people dependent. It takes a producer and a network of ranch hands and neighbors to bring the day to a close, even if you had to skip a few pages in the manual.

May you find all your ear tags.

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