

Get 'em Work-ready

Breeders identify their low-cost strategies for developing bulls.

by Joann Pipkin, freelancer



Do the math. A herd bull represents more than 50% of the future genetics in your customer's operation. As a seedstock supplier, developing those bulls can wreak havoc on your bottom line. Getting the job done as efficiently and effectively as possible not only means more pennies in your pocket, but also greater opportunity for a satisfied customer.

"We believe bulls should be developed in such a manner that they express their genetic ability and differences within their contemporary group," explains Jim Bush, Bush Angus, Britton, S.D. "The end product should be a healthy, athletic bull with properly shaped hooves."

Bush says the longevity of the bulls he sells is very important, especially when they prove to be a valuable addition to his customers' operation.

Still, getting a bull from weaned calf to herd-sire status isn't as easy as adding two plus two.

Get them to grow

According to University of Missouri (MU) Extension Beef Nutritionist Justin Sexten, adequate protein and energy to support lean growth are key elements in developing nutrition programs for seedstock bulls.

"Bulls have the potential to grow rapidly," he says. "As a result, balancing the diet to support both the amino-acid and energy needs of a developing bull can be challenging."

Economical feeds, Sexten says, are nutrient-dense and digestible, though they may be priced higher. On a cost per unit of gain, those pencils in as less expensive, he explains. Corn and distillers' grains products are cost-effective ingredients, especially when compared to what those feedstuffs were priced at in recent years.

"The cheapest, most overlooked nutrient is clean water," Sexten says, adding that regular cleaning of waterers is a good idea.

"Work with your nutritionist to find ingredient combinations suited to your production goals," Sexten advises.

That's just what Bush does to help him get the numbers right. With the assistance of a nutrition professional, Bush is better able to ensure grain, silage and hay in his ration are properly balanced.

"We feed all homegrown commodities," Bush explains. "We emphasize the quality of the products that make up the ration. Usually, the end result is that we get more bang for our buck with strict attention to quality."

Utilizing homegrown feed is key for many seedstock operators to help keep costs in check. Coupled with

commodity feeds, seedstock providers like Missouri-based Circle A Ranch and Gerloff Farms are better able to keep feed costs under control.

Among Circle A's strategies for low-cost bull development is delayed creep feeding.

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— Charlie Gerloff



► In recent years, Dalebanks Angus, Eureka, Kan., has focused bull development on achieving more gain from growing their own forage rather than on lower-energy rations in feedlot scenarios.



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“Most bulls are not creep-fed until 60 days before weaning,” says Jeff Gooden, manager of the ranch’s registered program based at Iberia, Mo.

“The diet the last 60 days (prior to weaning) is not one designed to get them fat,” he continues. “It seems to slow their growth pattern down if we get the bulls too fat.”

Once weaned, Gooden says the bulls are put on a high-forage, finisher ration composed of silage, ground hay, corn and dried distillers’ grains (DDGs).

“We feed them pretty hard until they are a year old to achieve optimum yearling weight,” he explains. “We shoot for bulls to weigh between 1,550 and 1,700 pounds (lb.) when marketed at about 18 months of age.”

Gooden says Circle A Ranch has been fortunate in recent years to raise most of their

own feed. “That helps cut costs,” he notes, adding it trimmed the amount of purchased commodities needed to feed the bulls.

Charlie Gerloff, Bland, Mo., is another Angus bull supplier who relies heavily on growing his own feed. In addition to corn silage and hay harvested from his farm, Gerloff purchases DDGs from a broker in nearby Saint Louis.

“Raising much of our own feed does help lower expenses when it comes to bull development,” Gerloff says. When grain prices soared in recent years, Gerloff says he was fortunate to have good silage and his own grain to feed.

He also opted to purchase a vertical mixer, which helped him further offset some of the high grain prices.

“I don’t think I could have stayed in business if I had bought all of my grain,” he states. The vertical mixer, he says, helps him better utilize home-raised grain and forage along with the purchased DDGs. Switching to the mixer helps ensure the bulls are not overconditioned.

After weaning, Gerloff relies on pasture in addition to once-a-day feeding to develop his stock.

“We try to develop bulls the cheapest way we can,” he says. “I really believe that the way we’re doing it now is not only beneficial from a cost standpoint, but also from a bull performance standpoint.”

According to Sexten, because grain prices have changed so dramatically the past couple of years, re-evaluating the bull diet can be used to enhance performance and reduce cost.

“Some producers have moved to a more forage-based diet in an effort to keep bulls leaner and maintain exercise opportunity,” Sexten says. “In many cases forages are the most expensive ingredient because they contribute very little to gain and reduce feed efficiency.”

PHOTOS BY JOANN PIPKIN



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Matt Perrier, who operates Dalebanks along with his father, Tom, explains their calves are pasture-weaned at approximately 6 to 7 months old on native tallgrass pasture across a barbed-wire or electric fence from their dams.

Spring-born calves, Perrier says, are fed a 20% protein “range cube” for about 45 days during the weaning period.

“If available, calves are then moved to a ‘cover crop’ consisting of turnips, radishes, peas and a cereal grain such as wheat, barley or oats,” he says. “They graze this and free-choice wheat straw for as long as the forage is available, about 30 to 60 days.”

Then at about 9-10 months of age, the bulls are moved into large feeding pens where they are fed a growth ration of corn, silage, ground hay and rolled corn. Perrier says their target average daily gain during this period is 3.5 lb. per day.

Using poor-quality, inexpensive forage such as wheat straw and dormant native-range pasture supplemented with protein is another low-cost strategy the Perriers use.

“[Our] bulls have very active rumen microbes at marketing time due to the large amounts of low-quality roughage [they consume],” he says, “so they are very adaptable to feed or forage in their new environment [at sale time].”

Perrier is hopeful he can continue to increase the amount of forage the bulls consume while also decreasing amounts of delivered energy concentrates.

“This is not solely driven by economics,” he says. “It’s more of a goal to produce range-ready bulls. But, it also has reduced corn and corn silage usage.”

Without sacrificing quality

While number crunching is part of the equation when it comes to bull development, Angus breeders are not willing to give up providing a quality animal for their customers.

“We try to produce a bull with the right genetics that will hopefully make money for the customer,” Gerloff explains. “We have to

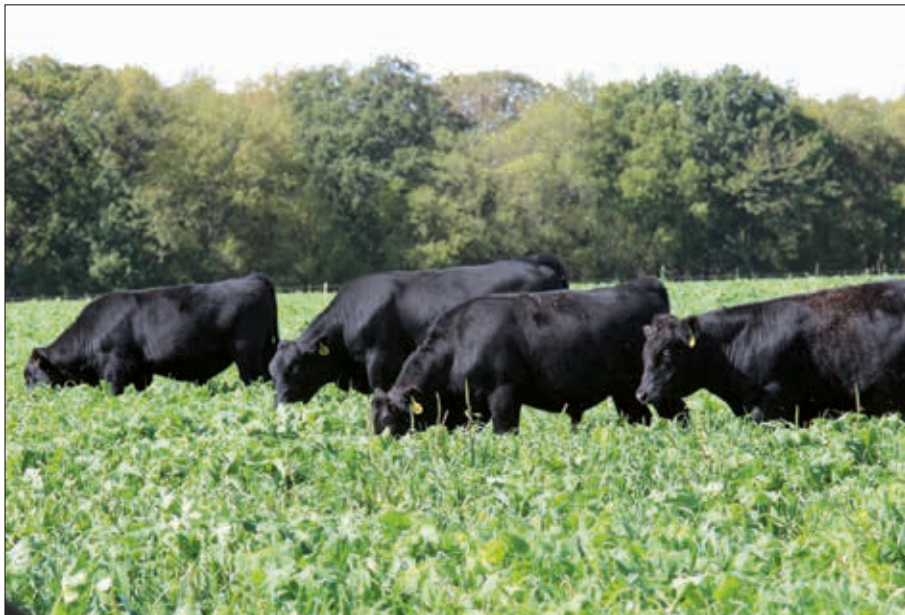


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develop the bulls so they are ready to go to work in the pasture.”

Gooden reiterates Circle A strives to raise bulls that will go out and fit the needs of the commercial cattleman.

“The way commodities are in this day and time, it is getting cheaper to feed cattle,” he says. “We’re always checking the price on commodities to see what will work for the lowest cost.”

The bottom line, though, Gooden says, is for Angus breeders to stay open-minded and know how to raise bulls with what feedstuffs are available and what is affordable.

“The kind of cattle that will work here in Missouri

might not be the kind of cattle that will work in Montana,” he notes. “You have to adjust your program to the kind of cattle you can raise and then sell to your customers.”

Environment is often key in bull development, Gooden says. “A lot of how cattle perform is based on the environment.”

The classic genetic formula is phenotype equals genetics plus environment, Sexten says. “Environment includes everything from how bulls are handled to what they are fed and the pasture they have grazed.”

He cites this example. A hand-fed bull is likely more docile than a range-developed bull assuming genetics are similar.

“Bulls can get too fleshy on high-quality

pasture,” Sexten says, noting it’s more challenging to ensure adequate nutrition on pasture than using an energy-dense development diet. Regardless of the source, once energy consumed exceeds energy needed for growth and maintenance, the bull can accumulate fat.

“Pasture increases energy spent by exercise and limits condition,” he says.

When comparing bull development in pasture-based environments to that of grain-fed scenarios, Sexten notes animal health should be expected to be better in pasture situations due to less confinement and congregation.

“Most breeders are feeding bulls about as hard on pasture as they were in confinement, so it is really the exercise and health components [that are beneficial],” Sexten says.

Ultimately, Sexten says, some feeds are more nutrient-dense or digestible than others.

For Bush, it’s all about continually searching for inexpensive means of developing bulls while also not sacrificing the way the animal looks — for both the breeder and the buyer.

“A customer cares less how much it cost the breeder to get the bull to breeding age,” Bush explains. “What he cares about is buying a bull that has breeding value, is sound and looks like a good investment.”



Editor’s Note: Joann Pipkin is a cattlegirl and freelance writer from Republic, Mo.

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