

# Industry Insight

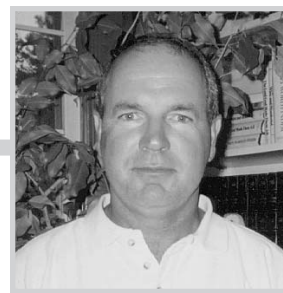
## Developing Bulls on Forage

An experienced panel of breeders examine the challenges of developing bulls on forage.

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### How does the current economic situation affect your decision-making for developing bulls on roughage as opposed to a ration of higher concentrates?

The current economic situation has little to do with how we choose to develop our bulls. We forage-tested our first bulls about eight years ago, for several reasons. Among them: 1. We were replacing too many “melted-down” yearlings that couldn’t handle the management of our average customers; 2. We saw too many feet/leg issues with the bulls that were pushed harder; 3. Customers were asking for older bulls and a forage-based system seemed the best option.

Our bulls are fed up to ½% of their body weight in concentrates. This is done for them to express the genetic differences at yearling weight and scan time. Once that is completed, they are “coasted” on their “forage-based” diet until sale time, at which point, bulls are 20 months old.

In everything we do, we want to ensure “longevity” into our programs and in the programs of our customers. A forage-based bull development program is the “right thing” to do for our bull customers. Our bulls are bigger, stouter, less fleshy, more athletic and conditioned to breed lots of cows at turnout time. We probably could stand a wider profit margin, but we do get the bulls sold for a price that is generally greater than the average of comparable yearling concentrate-grown genetics. In the end, it is the right thing to do for the average bull customer in our area.

### Discuss the biggest challenges associated with developing bulls on forage.

The first few groups of bulls were tough ones to market. We were a bit ahead of the curve and didn’t have a lot of examples to look at, so we made lots of developmental mistakes. Finding the right program and scheme to make our bull development work just took a bit of time to accomplish.

In addition, the perception of and acceptance in using “leaner” bulls was a hurdle we have had to jump. Some customers are still reluctant when at other sales they see heavier conditioned bulls with huge ADG numbers. Forage-raised bulls are different; we have to educate the customer about the values of “growin’ em slow.” Also, some competitors argue about the genetics being “fresher” or newer on yearling bulls. My answer to that is simple: our main focus is the commercial cattleman and I am producing what he/she needs in a more “predictable package” by using more proven genetics in a development situation that is designed for longevity.

If you are working with borrowed money, the extra six months of feeding time can be an issue. However, once you get the “ball rolling,” your payday comes back in line easily and steadily. Interest rates can be an issue if you are dealing with borrowed money, but with some planning, it is of little consequence. Costs have crept up the last couple of years for all of us and breakevens are higher with bull development too. There will be temptations to “scrimp and save” in any way possible. Acting upon those temptations could be seriously detrimental in the long term. Keep your focus where it should be for your customers. They are the ultimate reason you do what you do.

### What have you discovered about the health and breeding readiness of bulls developed on forage compared to those developed on grain?

A good wean-vac 45 program ensures a great start, followed by quality pastures, hay, haylage or even silage, in some cases. Bulls can be raised in larger traps or pastures to minimize mud and optimize exercise. We have found the forage-raised bulls exhibit better temperaments, greater athleticism and are more alert, with greater libido. Also, forage-raised bulls have almost no incidence of acidosis/bloat or feet and leg issues associated with “harder feeding.”

One of the best things is that we almost never experience the need to replace the forage-raised bulls. This, in turn, allows us to structure our replacement policies in a more confident manner.

### What is level of acceptance of forage-tested bulls by the bull-buying public? Please explain your answer.

Today, our bull customers widely accept older, more athletically conditions bulls that get out and breed more cows. Our customers often tell us that forage-raised bulls gain weight during the breeding season. Early on, the “savvy” bull buyers recognized the value in our older, more optimally conditioned bulls and we are gaining more and more ground each year with a larger, stronger and more loyal customer base.

The acceptance in using forage-developed bulls is still manifested in some reluctant potential customers. We understand when they attend competing sales, that they can see heavier conditioned bulls with massive average daily gains, this is traditional performance. We choose to redefine performance and our forage-raised bulls are raised differently; we have to educate the customer about the values of slower feeding schemes and how they create longevity with the bull dollars they choose to invest.

We have always raised our bulls in a 10 to 15 acre pasture of bahia grass or ryegrass/clover mix and fed soybean hull pellets as our only concentrate. The bulls must walk the length of the field several times a day between feed, water and shade. This year, we fed a mixture of other by-products, trying to reduce costs, but the gain has not been as good as on soybean hull pellets only. In the future, we will probably look at more wheat pasture in the fall/early winter and less feed.

The three biggest challenges to raising bulls on forage are: 1) you need to allocate a lot more acreage and facilities to grow the forage; 2) you generally will have to keep the bulls to an older age to get them to breeding size and condition; and, 3) in the summer months, the quality of forage decreases significantly here in the southeastern United States.

As I stated before, at Wells Farm, our bulls get a good bit of exercise even when fed concentrate, so they are generally pretty hard and muscular, but we have also consigned bulls for years to both grazing and feed lot type bull tests. The bulls on the feed lot tests do seem to come off test with too much fat and sometimes developed foot problems, whereas the bulls coming off grazing tests appear harder and may not “fall apart” when turned out with the cow herd.

Our bulls that have sold at the forage-based tests have never looked as fat and slick as the concentrate-fed bulls, but they have always sold extremely well. This may be because the cattlemen in Alabama may desire a little older bull, or they may believe that they hold up better when they are not overly fat.

We continuously strive, like anyone else, to be as efficient as possible and maintain positive profit margins. There are numerous reasons why we choose to develop bulls in a management intensive grazing system and cost efficiency is definitely one of them. Growing bulls on a daily intake of no less than 65% grass and the rest in feedstuffs, like distiller’s grains, keeps our costs at a minimum. The extra margins we create by doing so allow us to participate in opportunities like the ASA’s carcass testing program, which provides us with real and accurate carcass data on our genetics. We can also devote more resources toward customer driven services like DVD catalogs, commercial heifer development, and feeder calf marketing.

Unequivocally, without a doubt, the biggest challenges lie within the realm of environment. By moving the development process out of the relative safe haven within the feed yard, we have detached all of the “crutches” that kept Mother Nature from adversely affecting certain genetic measurements. As a result, we are presented the opportunity to evaluate and select for additional positive traits that can’t be measured in a feedlot. The terms hardiness and “do-ability” come to mind when describing traits that are associated with an individual’s ability to be successful within its surroundings. For example, heat and humidity can be problems whether you grow bulls on pasture or in a yard; however, try throwing infected fescue grass in to that mix and see how your genetics respond. Our system has been beneficial to sire selection by eliminating genetic lines of cattle that cannot adapt to the local environment. Discoveries like these are only possible one way. The animals have to be subjected to them directly.

We have found that the readiness of a breeding bull is not as closely tied to age as traditionally believed. It is evident that conditioning and management have as much to do with the “work-ability” of an animal as his age. Granted, a bull’s potency and ability to cover cows, increases until maturity; for that reason, it is obvious that a yearling cannot breed like a three-year-old. However, it is our observation that yearling bulls raised in a tougher environment are far more prepared and successful as first year breeders. The fatter they are, the harder it is to transition onto grass and work. A more strictly regimented diet consisting of a balance between forages and feedstuffs keeps bulls more fit to perform. For example, nearly all of our young bulls pass a thorough semen evaluation at 11-12 months of age. Their scrotums are free of fat and testicles producing very high-quality semen long before the 15-month old benchmark established by some universities.

Acceptance is very high, as most customers tend to prefer tougher bulls. Over the past decade, industry driven standards have forced everyone to pay strict attention to carcass improvement and gain efficiencies. And, until recently, producers lacked the tools and technologies to measure carcass quality and feedlot traits without replicating that environment, thus over-feeding their bulls. Therefore, for years, commercial cattlemen have not had the ability to have their cake and eat it to. Nowadays, by making use of breed association sponsored programs and new genetic tools, producers can offer their customers a rugged and reliable product that meets the pre-existing standards at all levels of the beef industry with confidence.