



Breeding Soundness Exam's (BSE's): What's the Value?

As spring approaches most cattlemen focus their attention on calving season. Cows and calves are often viewed as the primary source of revenue for a cow-calf herd, forgetting the other half of the equation - the bulls. It's easy to forget about an annual breeding soundness exam (BSE) to ensure your bull's fertility, as the consequences aren't readily visible until the next spring when calf numbers are low.

Having an annual BSE performed on your bulls is a cheap insurance policy to make sure that your cows have the greatest chance of being bred quickly and efficiently. Many producers make the mistake of believing that passing a BSE once ensures a bull is good for life. Any number of things can cause a bull to fail a BSE, even if he has passed before. Having a bad bull on your farm is far too expensive of a mistake to allow.

Consider the following scenarios:

- **Scenario A:** A 50 cow, cow-calf operation with a set breeding season utilizing 2 bulls. Both bulls are sound for breeding and can service 25-30 cows each. Conservatively, you wean 45 calves (90% of your calf crop). The group of calves is close in age, born early in the season and have a higher average weight at sale. You sell your 45 calves averaging 650lbs at \$150/cwt grossing \$43,875.00.
- **Scenario B:** A 50 cow, cow-calf operation with a set breeding season utilizing 2 bulls. One bull is not sound for breeding and as a result the other bull breeds 40 cows. You're a stellar calf raiser and wean 40 calves (100% of your calf crop). The calf group is spread out in age, as your single bull was overworked and required more time to settle 40 cows. You sell your 40 calves averaging 600lbs at \$150/cwt grossing \$36,000.
- **Difference in Profit:** \$43,875.00 - \$36,000.00 = **\$7,875.00 difference** in calf sale income for the year.

This is just one example of potential profit. The numbers may be different for your farm on any given year. What this example demonstrates is that by avoiding the above scenario just once in your career you will more than pay for the cost of annual BSE's.

3 Components of a Complete BSE:

1. Physical/Structural Exam
2. Reproductive System Exam
3. Semen Motility/Morphology Exam

It is important to ensure an animal passes all 3 components of the exam. An animal with bad legs will not be able to mount and breed well. A bull who bred well last year and looks great this year may have experienced frostbite or trauma to his testicles over the winter may no longer be able to produce viable sperm. Finally, a complete exam not only looks for "swimmers" but ensures that the semen is at least 70% normal and free from defects which may prevent fertilization.

A BSE is a "snapshot" of an individual bulls ability on the day he is tested. To maximize the value of the exam, bulls should be tested as close to turn out as possible, while allowing time for sourcing a replacement bull, in the event the bull fails. Some bulls may be classified as "deferred" meaning he can be retested and may pass at a later date. A mature bull can be retested in 6-10 weeks, as 60 days is required for a complete new group of semen to form. Yearling bulls can have deferral rates as high as 20%, as they may simply be too immature at their first exam. Yearling's classified as deferred should be re-examined monthly if they are prepubescent.