

Northwest Veterinary Associates, Inc.

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Bulls aren't cheaper

Frequently, producers assume that natural-service bulls are practically free after their initial purchase expense is made. Bulls also are perceived to save money and time by eliminating inefficient estrus detection programs that often hinder the A.I. success. Both of these assumptions should be reexamined.

First, for those who raise their own replacement heifers, costs of estrus detection should be considered an investment rather than an expense due to A.I.'s proven advantages. Second, many of the costs of managing bulls are hidden within the overall expenses of a dairy operation. Consider the following:

Feed costs. For example, a bull that consumes \$2 worth of feed per day costs \$730 per year in feed maintenance costs. At the commonly used bull-to-female ratio of 1:25 (1 bull for every 25 females), the cost per pregnancy when using bulls is nearly \$30 in feed costs alone. Of course, this cost depends on the bull-to-female ratio and ultimately on the number of pregnancies the bull produces per year. Feed maintenance costs for bulls also incur opportunity costs because this feed could be used to produce milk if fed to lactating cows.

Less milk. Introducing bulls into housing facilities for lactating cows also reduces the farm's overall capacity to produce milk. Each lactating cow on the farm represents an opportunity to produce milk and, when housing facilities are full, the maximum capacity to produce milk is realized, thereby maximizing return on capital investment. When natural-service bulls enter the milking cow pens, those bulls displace an equal number of productive cows. As mentioned above, bulls eat feed that could be converted to milk and occupy free stalls meant for lactating cows, thereby reducing the farm's ability to produce milk.

Vet and facility costs. Bulls require special holding pens during periods of nonuse. Bulls are no angels. They accelerate wear and tear on facilities, adding to repair costs when housed in free stall barns designed for cows. Veterinary costs shouldn't be overlooked. They include vaccinations, periodic breeding soundness and semen quality examinations, and treatment for sicknesses and injuries. Head gates and squeeze chutes also should be purchased for safe handling and restraint of bulls during these activities.

Danger. The nuisance that bulls present to a dairy operation is difficult to assess monetarily but should be considered nonetheless.