

Florida Bull Test Station

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Introduction

Central bull tests have been conducted in other states for many years, providing cattlemen with the opportunity to purchase bulls that have demonstrated their ability gain post weaning. Before the development of performance records and EPD's, the generally accepted rules for improving livestock were: 1. Breed the best to the best, and, 2. Select your bulls for their superior performance in the environment in which you expect their offspring to perform. The central test provided the opportunity to compare breeding programs in a common environment.

Today a central test serves the same function as in the past, (i.e. comparative performance in a common environment). I see some other benefits as well. One of the big ones is allowing the small breeder with just a few bulls to expose the buying public to his production when they would not go to his place because of the lack of sufficient numbers to provide selection opportunity. Another is the availability of more detailed animal information that is uniformly collected and presented. For larger seedstock producers, the test will provide an opportunity to advertise their program through the bulls they test. For the buyer, I see an opportunity to compare bulls by a number of sires at the same location and with all the data presented in a consistent manner, so selection for the traits of most importance to his program should be easier. The same is true for comparing different breeds at the same time and under the same conditions. Another advantage is the number of bulls that are available, although, this is entirely dependent on participation by seedstock producers in the region.

Facilities

At the Florida Bull Test Facility there will be two circular test areas of thirteen 3.5 acre pens each plus, if needed, twelve rectangular pens of the same area. According to Department of Environmental Protection guidelines, each pen can hold up to fifteen head. Each pen will have a water tank and a self-feeder with the feeder at the outside fence, and the water three fourths of the way towards the center, thus encouraging the bulls to exercise. Each pen will empty into a circular center area and a lane leading to the working pens and sale arena.

Test Procedures

The bull calves will be delivered to the test facility on September 10 and 11, 1999. After a three week adjustment period, the cattle will be weighed on two consecutive days and the average of the two weights will be the official on-test weight. This procedure will be repeated after 112 days for the official off-test weight. During the test, the bulls will be weighed every 28 days to check progress. At the end of the test, or at a 28 day weight, if needed, to meet age requirements, the bulls will have hip height, scrotal circumference and ultrasound carcass measurements taken. They will also be evaluated for structural soundness and disposition at the end of the test. The goal is to provide every useful piece of information possible on the bulls that will be available through the sale.

The health requirements are designed to protect the health of all of the bulls entered in the test, as well as, provide healthy bulls ready to face the challenges they will be exposed to when they leave the test. These requirements are very similar to the recommendations for feeder cattle that are being

commingled and expected to perform at a high level.

The third Saturday in February (February 19,2000) will be the sale of the top two thirds of the tested bulls based on a combination of average daily gain and weight per day of age. Complete performance data will be available, as well as, ultrasound evaluation for carcass traits. The bulls will have been screened for reproductive soundness(BSE), disposition and structural soundness. One of the objectives of the test station is to showcase superior beef cattle genetics in Florida. These genetics will be available through the sale. I invite you to come see for your self.

Other Activities at the Station

Two new faculty positions have been requested to work at the station in conjunction with forage agronomist, Dr. Ann Blount. Until they are hired, we are continuing the herd productivity project with the Angus cows from Chipley. We are modifying our sire selection to emphasize growth and milk to see if we can maintain the carcass quality improvements while improving growth rates and carcass size.

In the next year if everything goes according to plan, we will initiate a progeny test. The objective will be to provide the industry with a way to obtain feeding performance and carcass data on the progeny of a particular sire. Calves will have to have documented parentage and weaning performance data.

Another project we hope to start is to look at integrating winter grazing with row crops and utilize them for heifer development. Our goal is to look at the economics of various systems to see if it can be an alternative enterprise for farmers in the area, as well as, an opportunity for more efficient heifer development for cattlemen in other parts of Florida.

Forage production and utilization is going to be a major program at the station. Dr. Blount's program already includes a wide variety of forages for production studies as well as a Bahia grass breeding project. In the future, we hope to look at grazing systems as well as alternative forage crops.

The construction of the facilities is scheduled to be completed by August. Our thoughts, at this time, are to hold an open house sometime in late August to give everyone an opportunity to see what has been accomplished and what I believe will be one of the most attractive Research and Education stations in the state.

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