



News for Immediate Release

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Pennsylvania Bull Test Celebrates 40 Years of Improving Beef Industry

Pennsylvania Furnace, Pa. – Pennsylvania’s beef industry will celebrate a milestone at the end of March: 40 years of improving genetics through the Pennsylvania Performance Bull Testing Program.

The test, administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture’s Livestock Evaluation Center in Rock Springs, outside of State College, has provided Pennsylvania’s beef industry with a way to measure traits that can be passed from one generation to the next through bulls.

“Our Livestock Evaluation Center offers great programs,” said Agriculture Secretary George Greig. “We’re helping cattlemen build more efficient and productive herds using the best stock our region can provide. This is the work that not only keeps Pennsylvania growing, but our region as well.”

The test measures traits using uniform housing and feeding for impartial evaluation of each bull. After completing a 112-day performance test, select bulls consigned by beef producers from across the region are auctioned off at the center the last Friday of March. Those top-performing bulls are put to work in herds from New England to the Gulf Coast, in the Midwest and overseas.

Since the first bull test in 1973, the center has adapted with advancing technology, offering more information on bulls and enhancing their marketability to potential buyers. Careful guidance and foresight have developed the center into a regional hub for improving the beef industry.

Progeny Testing – The First Efforts

Early evaluation efforts in Pennsylvania included a progeny test, where five or six sons of a bull would be grown to a predetermined weight. The steers would then be slaughtered and carcass measurements taken to determine the performance of the bulls that sired the steers. That test sought to identify bulls that would sire the best, most improved cattle, and call them “Certified Meat Sires.”

“With 10 small pens of six to eight steers, the progeny test was limited on space,” said Penn State Veterinarian Dr. Lester Griel, who serves the center. “When new studies emerged that showed that the sire’s characteristics were a strong indicator of offspring performance, the testing program shifted to bull testing. That allowed testing to be completed more quickly with capacity for more bulls.”

Then vs. Now

The first performance bull tests were 140 days long, reporting data derived from weights taken at points in the test as well as estimated carcass measurements. The first test evaluated 53 bulls – mostly Charolais and Angus. Its sale averaged \$1,020.

Throughout its existence, the testing program added data categories and improved on technology. Breed associations introduced expected progeny differences (EPDs), evaluations of an animal's genetic worth; the center began administering breeding soundness exams; and ultrasound technology, available from the start, improved in accuracy and usability.

"It's interesting to note the volume of information buyers can access now compared to those early sales," said Griel. "Today's producers can make very informed decisions when it comes to purchasing a bull that fits their needs."

Having outgrown its old testing station, the program moved in 2003 to its current grounds near Penn State's Ag Progress Days site. The move allowed the center to expand the scope of its bull testing program and become the regional evaluation center it is today, hosting bulls from neighboring states as well as homegrown stock.

Today, participating bulls complete a shorter 112-day performance test with a three week break from the intensive feeding regimen before the sale. Program records provide snapshots of decades of industry improvement through feed technology and genetics. Average daily gain for the 1973 bull test was between 2-3.5 pounds. In 2013, average daily gain ranges from 3-5.24 pounds.

Improving the Industry

"Those numbers are the facts. In 40 years, we've made great strides in improving beef cattle," said Dr. John Comerford, Penn State Professor of Animal Science.

Productivity has increased in nearly 75 percent of performance-tested bull buyers' herds, according to a survey of those producers. Through improvements in carcass traits, feed efficiency and genetics passed to the next generation, these bulls are an asset to the regional beef industry and its economy.

"Pennsylvania's investment in performance testing programs has paid off," said Comerford. "We estimate that each year, bulls from the testing program provide \$100,000-200,000 in added value through higher weaning weights alone." Bulls also improve offspring performance in feedlots and as replacement females, ensuring breeders' investments will pay off.

The Next 40 Years

Centrally located within Pennsylvania, the center serves beef producers from across the region. Even as EPDs and genomic testing become more important, the center provides real-world information and bulls for a regional beef industry with smaller cow numbers.

“Environment affects performance,” said Griel. “While genetic information shows us how bulls may perform, not all genes are expressed equally. This test shows how bulls perform in the real world.”

The test remains important for beef producers. And it adapts with the times, turning to web video site YouTube to show producers videos of the bulls being offered for sale. LiveAuctions.tv will stream auction video live on the web, giving producers a chance to bid from their farms. Sale catalogs are available from the center’s website, as are bull pictures and other information.

“Producers in our region have access to a facility that is unequaled nationwide,” said Comerford. “During a time when the beef industry is faced with a smaller herd size, reducing the beef available to consumers, it’s imperative that we maintain a high quality product with outstanding eating satisfaction. This test takes on a greater role than ever before in keeping beef in high demand.”

Happening Now

Join producers at the 40th Anniversary Performance-Tested Bull Sale Friday, March 29, at noon at the center. Four decades in, the center’s timeless mission holds true to its roots, improving beef cattle in the region and helping feed the world more efficiently than ever.

“This is a great time to be involved with the test,” said evaluation center manager Gregory Hubbard. “Our consignors always offer top-notch bulls to fit any producer’s needs. We’re a one-stop-shop for improving beef cattle wherever these bulls will go.”

The center also offers testing programs for goats, pigs and sheep throughout the year and is available to host other livestock events. Consign to any of the testing programs or receive a bull sale catalog by visiting the center’s website at www.livestockevaluationcenter.com or calling 814-238-2527.

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