



► The bulls at the Edisto Forage Bull Test are in working condition and almost 2 years old by the time they leave.

Real-world Testing

South Carolina forage test gets young bulls ready for their grown-up jobs.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**, field editor

With genomic-enhanced expected progeny differences (EPDs) available, it is tempting to question the need for central bull tests. Scott Sell, director of the Edisto Forage Bull Test, puts a stop to that kind of thinking in a hurry.

“They are still the only place where you can actually see what two bulls do in the same environment and nutritional setting,” he explains.

He is also adamant about the advantages of a forage rather than a grain test, noting, “This is the way bulls will be fed on 95% of the farms that buy them.”

Consignor and Angus breeder Dixon Shealy agrees. “I haven’t come across anybody who raises bulls like the average commercial cattleman. The forage test is as close as we can get.”

“Bulls usually lose weight after they come off a grain test. Here they are ready to rock and roll when they leave,” adds Gillian Tuttle, cow-calf manager for the Edisto Research and Education Center (EREC), home of the Blackville, S.C., bull test.

Also, a forage

test is a prime place to test the working structure of a young bull, Sell says. “The bulls have to get out and walk. Here we have a little bit of all of it — rock, sand, gumbo. With a grain test, all they have to do is walk to the trough.”

When they leave the test facility at almost 2 years of age, they are ready to breed cows, he adds.

The bulls stay at EREC for almost a year. The test is open to bulls born from Dec. 1 through March 31. They come in the Monday after Thanksgiving, then go on test Dec. 1. The bulls that are eligible for the sale and not returned to their owner’s farm leave at sale time on the second Saturday in October.

“The actual test length is 168 days,” Sell says. “That is 56 days longer than most grain tests.” Like a grain test, however, they are weighed every 28 days.

While some question the bulls’ ability to express their genetic gain potential on forage, Sell says, “You



► **Above:** Dixon Shealy says he can compare his family’s bulls to bulls from other breeders at the Edisto Forage Bull Test.



► **Left:** Clemson University forage specialist John Andrae says to choose a variety of high-quality forages for year-round grazing.



► Scott Sell, director of the Edisto Forage Bull Test, works to keep grazing in front of the bulls year-round.

may not see an average daily gain (ADG) of 5.5 pounds (lb.), but you will see the differences.”

He says the actual gain varies widely

depending on the forage and growing conditions. In the winter, when the bulls are grazing small-grain forages, they can gain 4.0 pounds (lb.) per day. In the heat of

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— Gillian Tuttle

late spring, that drops. Overall, he says, they average around a 2.5-lb. ADG.

That suits Shealy, the Newberry, S.C., consignor, just fine.

“We have an on-farm test, and we don’t push our bulls,” he says. “They average 2.5 pounds a day, too.”

The economics of the test also appeal to him. Farm manager for his family’s Black Grove Farm, last year was the first year Shealy sent bulls to the test. The total charges, including sale charges, were \$680. The total bill for the 2013 test will be between \$750 and \$800.

Shealy opted to bring home five of the seven bulls the farm consigned to sell them by private treaty. Through the end of the

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Growing on forage takes growing forage

Keeping high-quality growing forage in front of young bulls year-round is a challenge and one that is even harder now.

“It started in ’83 as a modified forage test,” Scott Sell, director of the Edisto Forage Bull Test, explains. “The bulls were fed 1% of their body weight in grain. Technically that is allowable under Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) guidelines. In 2010 they went to an all-forage test.”

To make it happen, Gillian Tuttle, beef cattle manager at the Edisto Research and Education Center (EREC) says, “We plan and plant ahead.”

For fall, winter and spring groceries, Sell and Tuttle use a no-till drill to plant ryegrass, wheat and arrowleaf clover. “You want to have adequate forage when they get here. That’s the challenge,” says Sell.

In the fall of 2012, they were able to plant the cool-season forages in September and got a good stand that lasted all the way until the first of June.

When the weather starts warming up and the cool-season forages begin to die out, they let the bulls graze the standing forage down close or use a herbicide to help knock back the growth, then they plant cow peas and millet.

Thankfully, they now have a base of Tifton 85 Bermuda grass, too, which provides insurance in the form of hay and extra grazing. When Sell came to the test at the end of 2012, there was no permanent grazing for the bulls.

Clemson extension forage specialist John Andrae comments, “Tifton 85 is a very dependable high-quality Bermuda grass with a long growing season.”

Andrae also agrees with the practice of keeping a variety of forages available. “Pick a good mix of species and high-quality varieties and include both warm- and cool-season species,” he recommends.

In addition, Sell gets creative at times. At one point, EREC researchers actually planted pigweed so they could study ways to eradicate it. The escaped weed took over certain fields. Rather than bemoan its existence, Sell turned the bulls out on the weed after they were off test and on maintenance. “While it is still immature, they’ll go after it,” he notes.

Sell and Tuttle also carefully manage the forage with planned rotational grazing. Although their stocking rate is often low, they move the bulls to a fresh paddock or pasture every one to two days, although Sell says that varies according to weather and forage growth.

“We had a 10-acre field of ryegrass, wheat and clover we left all 47 bulls on for days on end,” Sell reports. “They also never put a dent in a field of millet.”

They are careful not to overgraze, however.

Once again, Andrae agrees with Sell and Tuttle’s approach.

“They try to give the cattle the ability to select forages,” he says. “There is some data that indicates, especially with warm-season forages, animals need the ability to do that. As a result, they are wasting some forage but are getting high gains.”

The key to it all, though, is planning. “You have to think ahead,” Sell stresses.

“We choreograph the grazing,” says Tuttle. “We play musical fields.”



► Gillian Tuttle is revitalizing the Angus herd at the Edisto Research and Education Center.

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actual test the end of May, his charges will probably be a little more than \$400.

"We contract out our on-farm test," he says. "The Edisto test can grow out our bulls for a third less. With our bulls on contract, I have to go up and weigh them every 28 days and keep up with the paperwork. Sending animals to Edisto, we know they are going to have good grass and we don't have to pay for grain."

For the producers who do sell through the sale, there is generally a good return on investment. Sale averages for the last five years have been between \$2,500 and \$3,000.

Shealy also appreciates Sell's efforts to keep the consignors informed. In addition to the 28-day weights, Sell sends a report every two weeks describing the forage conditions and anything else he thinks the consignors might want to know. "It keeps you really feeling involved."

He adds, "Edisto gives us an objective test, and we're able to compare the bulls we're breeding to bulls from other breeders. We're satisfied. Next year we are going to send all our eligible bulls."



Editor's Note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.

Angus presence growing at South Carolina research station

Out of the 47 young bulls on test at the Edisto Forage Bull Test this year, 37 were Angus. "That reflects the popularity of the breed in South Carolina," says bull test director Scott Sell.

He and farm manager Gillian Tuttle plan to capitalize on that popularity. During the Oct. 12 bull sale, the Edisto Research and Education Center (EREC) plans to auction 17 black and black-baldie heifers that were artificially inseminated (Aled) to an Angus bull.

Sell and Tuttle hope there will be more sales of quality Angus from EREC. At one time the Center's 150 cows were registered Angus, but when animal scientist Larry Olson retired, there was no one to manage it. Now, Tuttle, who has been at the station for a year and a half, and Sell, who has been there since December, have jumped at the opportunity to bring the registered herd back.

"What Gillian has done with the cow herd in the short time she's been here is amazing," says Sell. "She has doubled the sales."

For more information see:

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