



# SETTING THE STAGE FOR A SUCCESSFUL BREEDING SEASON

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The breeding season is around the corner for many spring-calving herds in the Southeast. This is a good time to pause and ask a straightforward question: are we setting ourselves up to maximize pregnancy rates and minimize the risk of open cows? Reproductive success is influenced by many factors, some of which cannot be corrected right before breeding begins. However, several key management decisions made ahead of the breeding season do contribute meaningfully to reproductive outcomes and to how smoothly the breeding season unfolds. This article highlights a few considerations producers should be thinking about now.

## *Cow herd plane of nutrition*

Maintaining cows on a positive plane of nutrition leading into the breeding season is one of the most important drivers of reproductive success. This is especially challenging in postpartum cows, whose nutrient requirements peak early in the breeding season. Cows that lose too much body condition after calving often experience delayed return to estrus, which increases the likelihood of late breeding or remaining open. Evaluating body condition now, rather than waiting until turnout, allows producers to make timely nutritional adjustments. Even small improvements in energy intake during this window can improve cyclicity and help cows enter the breeding season in a better physiological state.

## *Bull pre-breeding management*

Bull fertility is often assumed rather than verified. Yet, a single subfertile bull can quietly compromise the reproductive performance of an entire herd. Breeding soundness examination (BSE) remains the most effective tool to reduce this risk. Bulls should be evaluated at least 30 to 60 days before turnout to allow time for retesting or replacing



bulls if needed. A complete BSE goes beyond semen quality. It includes an evaluation of scrotal circumference, structural soundness, feet and legs, eyes, and overall bull health. Winter weight loss, injury, or illness can negatively affect semen quality, even in bulls that passed a previous exam. Passing a BSE one year does not guarantee fertility the next. In practical terms, confirming bull fertility before turnout is a relatively low-cost step that protects pregnancy rates and reduces the likelihood of open cows at the end of the breeding season.

### *Replacement heifer pre-breeding evaluations*

Replacement heifers represent the future of the herd, and decisions made before their first breeding season have long-term consequences. Evaluating heifers 4 to 6 weeks before breeding provides an opportunity to identify animals that are unlikely to conceive during their first breeding season. Body weight remains one of the most reliable indicators of proper heifer development. It is recommended that heifers reach approximately 60 to 65 percent of their expected mature body weight by the start of the breeding season. Beyond weight, additional tools can improve heifer selection decisions. Pelvic area measurements help producers identify heifers at higher risk for calving difficulty, while reproductive tract scoring provides insight into pubertal status and likelihood of early conception, which is a major driver of longevity.

### *Planning Ahead for Reproductive Technologies*

Reproductive technologies such as estrus synchronization, artificial insemination, and embryo transfer can improve genetic progress and reproductive efficiency, but success depends largely on planning and execution. Many challenges associated with these programs stem from logistical issues. Addressing details well before the breeding season helps avoid mistakes once breeding is underway.

Protocol selection should be made early and aligned with herd type, labor availability, and facilities. Ordering synchronization products and semen ahead of time reduces the risk of shortages or last-minute substitutions. Semen inventories should be verified, storage tanks checked, and semen handling procedures reviewed. For seedstock operations using embryo transfer, early communication

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with their embryologists is equally important to confirm their availability, align schedules, and coordinate donor setup, embryo flushings, follicle aspirations, and embryo transfers.

Producers looking for help organizing synchronization protocols and injection timing can use the free estrus synchronization app developed by the Beef Reproduction Task Force (found at [beefrepro.org](http://beefrepro.org)). The app provides step-by-step schedules for commonly used beef cattle protocols and serves as a practical planning tool when coordinating labor, supplies, and breeding dates.

### *In Summary*

No single management decision guarantees reproductive success, but preparation before the breeding season reduces risk and improves consistency. Evaluating cow nutrition, confirming bull fertility, assessing replacement heifers, and planning ahead for reproductive technologies all help prevent problems that are difficult or expensive to fix once breeding is underway. Operations that do this groundwork are better positioned to achieve higher pregnancy rates, fewer open females, and a more profitable calf crop.

For more information about breeding season management, contact your local Cooperative Extension office ([extension.uga.edu](http://extension.uga.edu), or 1-800-ASK-UGA-1).



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