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## Veterinarians test cattle's hearts, virility

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**JERRY McBRIDE / Herald**

A bull undergoes a virility test March 2 during the High Altitude Bull Test held at the San Juan Basin Research Center in Hesperus. This bull underwent tests to determine its health and virility. Carolyn Watson, of Ignacio, helps the bull stand in place.

Editor's note: This is part two of a two-part series on the Four Corners High Altitude Bull Test. Part one, on how the test produces big bulls, appeared March 4.

HESPERUS - Poked, prodded and pushed, one by one the reluctant bulls find themselves stuck inside a chute, ready to undergo the ultimate doctor visit.

Luckily the bulls suffer from no sense of immodesty as one veterinarian checks vitals at the front and another approaches from the rear. Meanwhile a few ranchers on hand keep the production line *mooving*.

What might look plenty uncomfortable to some is actually meant to determine if the animals are in good health. It's all part of the annual High Altitude Bull Test, which lasts 120 days and concluded March 2. Bulls from all over Colorado, New Mexico and Utah are supposed to pack on the pounds. Also, on the final weigh-in day, veterinarians test to ensure the cattle are healthy.

For ranchers, livelihood depends on their animals' health; testing for common diseases is in ranchers' and the bulls' interest, according to those helping with the event.

In April, the top 75 percent from each breed will be auctioned.

Most of the animals involved in the bull test will be sold for breeding. Only those that are sick or infertile will be slaughtered.

Tim Holt, a veterinarian from Gunnison who also teaches at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, travels to Hesperus each year for the event. He and veterinarian Greg Schick perform three tests: to determine a predisposition to brisket disease, to check for trichomoniasis - a venereal disease - and to make sure the bulls are virile and potential breeders.



**JERRY McBRIDE / Herald**

**Todd McMenimen, left, a Bayfield rancher, and Ken Shively, in cowboy hat, help secure a bull as veterinarian Tim Holt, right, prepares to conduct a pulmonary artery pressure test March 2.**

One by one, with needle in hand, Holt approaches the bulls, trying to find the main jugular vein on each bull's neck. Locating the vein through hair takes some practice, but Holt knows what he's doing; he's been at it since the 1980s. As two ranchers hold the bull's head to the side, Holt finds the vein and inserts a needle, the entry point for a catheter that will reach the bull's heart.

"We keep looking for better ways to do this, but we haven't found one yet," Holt said laughing.

Holt is conducting a pulmonary arterial pressure test for brisket disease, a high-altitude disease that affects some cattle, making their lungs and organs fill with fluid,

stressing the heart and eventually causing death. For ranchers whose cattle graze at high altitude, it is vital to know whether their animals have a predisposition to the disease.

Sliding a catheter into the jugular vein, then into the heart and hitting the bull's main pulmonary artery, Holt monitors each bull's pulmonary pressure. For the bulls, the lower the number the better; between 35 and 45 is optimal.

With a monitor located just across from the pen, Holt can see the blips go up and down. He hollers out the heart rate and the number gets recorded. This bull has a rate of 75. Holt said that the high number doesn't mean the bull isn't healthy, but it shouldn't remain at a high altitude. Any higher than that and the vets start to worry. A few bulls registered above 100 on the final test day and the owners picked up those animals, said Ken Shively, a herdsman with the Four Corners Beef Cattle Improvement Program.

In the next pen there is a bull with brisket disease. He appears lethargic and his hind quarters are bony. Rancher Carolyn Watson points out the bloating on the animal from fluid retention. This bull won't survive.

For most of the "patients," the test goes quickly. Other than blood spurting from the bulls' necks, and the ranchers trying to keep the bulls' heads immobilized, the animals don't seem to mind.

The work is tiring, as the ranchers try to keep the cattle moving forward so they get locked inside the pen for testing. Some of the bulls are stubborn and don't want to move. The work is messy and all involved are wearing their share of cowflops.

While Holt gets the bull's heart stats at the front, Schick, a veterinarian from Pagosa Springs, starts working at the rear. Schick hasn't drawn the short straw, he said he doesn't mind the job. Those on hand joke that Schick requests the back end every year.

The job is dirty, but necessary. Holt said, "We make sure the animals are healthy. People who come here to buy a bull know that they can be confident."

Schick starts by feeling the bull's testicles, checking that they feel normal and do not have any infections. Then he measures the testicles. The bigger the better.

Once he's got the bull by the horns, so to speak, he puts on the glove. The glove goes almost up to the shoulder, and without ceremony, Schick puts his hand into the bull's anus. He inserts a caliper that will measure the pelvic area.

Watson said that although the process may be dirty and slimy, the measurements are important. The bull's genes will be passed down to his progeny, and the larger the pelvic region, the more likely its young will have similar measurements. The larger the pelvic area, the easier for future heifers to carry a calf.

To learn whether the bull is virile, Schick then inserts an electric stimulator, nicknamed the silver bullet. The stimulation excites the bull so that Holt can catch a semen sample. Schick examines the semen for movement and to see if the bull is potentially a good breeder.

Once the mooing has ended and the bull recovers his composure, he is subjected to one last test: trichomoniasis. The venereal disease is hard to treat, Watson said. If a bull has it, most likely it will be slaughtered. The disease can be costly to a rancher because a heifer that gets trich may suffer early abortions and be unable to bear calves. Bulls with the disease cannot be cured.

A long pipette is slid inside the bull's penis, and Holt scrapes the area, purposely causing some bleeding. The fluid collected in the pipette is then put inside a receptacle to determine if the bull has the disease. Each bull is tagged on its right ear for future identification.

For all the work and effort, the testing takes only a few minutes per bull, and like clockwork the crew is on to the next animal. But with more than 100 head of cattle to test, the process will take two days.

In the end, the indignation the bulls may suffer is worth the effort to buyers, who know the animal is quality, Holt said. "If someone is going to invest in an animal they want to know it is healthy."

*Reach Staff Writer Mary Ann Lopez [here](#).*