

# March Bull Sales are Upon Us!

By Kaitlin McLachlan

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March is here! My favourite time of the year! If you are anything like me, going to get the mail is almost like Christmas – there might be the gift of a sale catalogue to flip through! Not only is Ritchie Bros. spring sale catalogue here, but bull sale catalogues are rolling in. Bull sale season is kicking off here in the Peace! If you were at our AGM you would have seen some flyers advertising some local sales and private treaty offerings in our Bull Sale Corner. If not, I'm sure that you have also been receiving catalogues in the mail, seen the digital versions on Facebook, and have likely gotten the *Bull Sale Supplement* in the last *Northern Horizon*.

If you are in the market for a new bull this spring, what are you looking for? Cow bull, heifer bull, simmental bull, black bulls, tan bulls, the list is endless! Purchasing a new bull is a big decision and can have a significant long-term effect on your herd, so it is important to determine what you want in a bull before heading to the sale barn. With the advances in technology with artificial insemination and embryo transfers, it is not hard to find high quality genetics here in the Peace Country. Remember, that when you are looking for a specific trait in a bull, such as a high rate of gain, other traits may be compromised, such as conformation of the feet and legs.

## Look at the Bull

When assessing a new potential herd sire, it is important to take into consideration many factors including: conformation, reproductive soundness, performance characteristics, and age. We all know what we like in the physical appearance of a bull – spring in the rib and girth, length in the topline, smoothness in the front, and width across the back with meat and muscle that carries down his hip into his leg. When in the pen with a potential bull, look at his feet. If you are breeding on pasture, he needs to be able to cover the miles and get up on females. Ensure that hooves are sound and solid. How he stands on his feet can give insight to how long his feet will last. If he sits back on his hooves, he may go slipper-footed over time and go lame. If he sits too far ahead, his knees might give out over time. Watch him on the move. Ideally, when a young animal walks, their back foot should land exactly where their front foot lands. If it lands behind, they may not be as flexible in their movement as they should be. If it lands to the outside or inside, they are splayfooted or pigeon-toed, meaning they swing their legs outwards or inwards when they walk. This may wear on his legs, knees and hips. Over time, his legs can potentially break down and he may go lame.

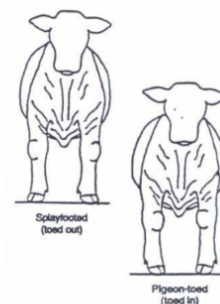


Illustration of Splayfooted and Pigeon-toed cattle via: sdstate.edu

Over the years it has become more and more common to buy yearling bulls, to the point that almost all the bulls on the market are yearlings. With the advances in genetics in the past years, there is little concern in turning a yearling bull out during the breeding season. However, it should not be expected that a yearling will cover as many cows as a mature bull. Yearlings also get worn down through the breeding season faster than mature bulls as they are still growing and developing themselves. While we may get one more year of use out of a yearling versus a two-year-old, we still need to be careful not to over-work him and take steps to grow him out properly.



There are a number of bull sales coming up in the Peace, for more information on local sales, check out the Northern Horizon Bull Sale Supplement at <http://bit.ly/1LcF2IV>  
photo via facebook.com/northernhorizoncd

Not only is it important to look at the bull himself, but also the program that he is coming out of. Most all breeders are open about their feeding and growing programs, and it is important to get that information on the bull's development. Bulls that have been on high-energy, grain-based rations will likely be heavier and packing more fat than those brought up on a forage-based ration, there may be some long-term consequences to consider. According to Dr John Kastelic, professor of cattle reproductive health at the University of Calgary, in a [www.canadiancattlemen.ca](http://www.canadiancattlemen.ca) article he warns against buying fat bulls. As with all cattle, when bulls are pushed too hard on high energy rations during their growing phase, issues may crop up later in that bull's life such as: reduced semen quality and count, poor feet and lameness, and potential digestive issues such as ruminitis and liver abscesses. On the other hand, bulls developed on a

forage diet may be on the lighter side come sale time. If they are on the smaller side, they may need a bit more attention during their continued growth to ensure they grow into maturity properly and last for the long-term.

# Bull Selection Con't

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## Read the Sale Catalogue

You've found a bull you really like visually. Looks alone are not enough to buy the bull however. Think of looking at the catalogue as looking up the bull's 'specs', similar to looking up the horsepower and pulling capacity of a new tractor! It may be shiny and green, but if it won't pull and run your baler, it's not a fit for you; the same goes for bulls.



Liking the look of a bull is the first step to selecting a new herd sire. Photo via: facebook.com/willow-creek-simentals

Birth weights are one of the first things we look at when flipping through a catalogue. It is something that has become commonplace in the commercial industry – buying a light birthweight bull means we won't have to be out in the middle of the night pulling calves. While that may be true, we also need to look at the long-term effects of breeding to light birthweight bulls year after year. It is important to remember that birth weights and yearling weights on bulls are very highly correlated. Some in industry caution against continually breeding for light birth weights as you are effectively selecting for a smaller framed and potentially frailer animal. Typically, heifers can handle up to 75lb calves with little issue, and mature cows can typically handle 80-95 lb calves with ease. Therefore, it is something to keep in mind when looking at a bull in a catalog. Maybe those light birthweight bulls are best suited for the heifers and a bull with a higher birthweight will

work for the mature cows.

Most sale catalogues have an explanation of EPDs and the averages for the breed being sold. If not, the *Bull Sale Supplement* in the last *Northern Horizon* also has these averages for your reference. Comparing a bull's EPDs to the breed average can give you an idea on the calving ease, and qualities of his offspring, such as carcass weight and milk quality. Explanations of EPD values compared to the breed average can typically be found.

It is becoming more and more commonplace to find additional information on bulls in catalogues aside from parentage, birthweight, yearling weight, and EPDs. Information such as DNA test results for colour and polledness, negative results to PI (persistently infected) for BVD, carcass data, and even ultrasound results for ribeye can be available. These values can be important to your operation - for example, if you are looking to buy a simmental bull who will throw black calves with no horns, you'd be looking at buying a bull who is homozygous black and homozygous polled.

Other important herd information is typically listed near the front or back of the catalogue. This includes farm vaccination protocols, nutrition program, when and where breeding soundness exams (semen tests & scrotal measurements) were taken, as well as any insurance options. When buying a bull, be cognisant that the majority of the issues we will have with a bull occur in the first year, therefore insurance is not a bad idea as bulls are a major investment.



PCBFA wishes all buyers and sellers the best this spring!  
Photo via: facebook.com/northernhorizondc

So keep this all in mind this spring when perusing the bull pens this spring. Take all of a bull's attributes into consideration and decide what is most important to you and your cow herd. Remember that a bull purchase will have a long-lasting impact on your cow herd! Wishing all a successful bull sale season and happy shopping!

## 2015 PCBFA Memberships expire March 31st!

Make sure to renew your membership to continue receiving relevant, local information, details on our projects & upcoming events, as well as your 2 free feed samples and all the other perks of PCBFA membership!

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# Sustainable Sourcing Coming to Alberta

By: Paul Watson  
Environmental Farm Plan Director

There are likely two questions that come to mind after reading the title. First, what is sustainable sourcing? And second, how can this be a good thing?

The Alberta Environmental Farm Plan defines sustainable sourcing as a “means of buying goods from suppliers who adhere to a code of practice that reduces the social, economic, and environmental impacts of food production, processing and distribution”.

Sustainable sourcing has been becoming a reality for many years now. About 10 years ago, I was involved in a project that aimed to get producers a premium for demonstrating “Good Agricultural Practices”. It was based on the knowledge that Alberta’s producers are good environmental stewards, and we wanted them to get paid for that. Fast forward to March 2015 when I attended an SAI Platform Meeting in Toronto, with a diverse group in attendance: livestock and crop industry groups, provincial EFP reps, academics, food industry, producer groups, and likely more. At the meeting, representatives from crop industry associations spoke about how they had come to the conclusion that sustainable sourcing was here to stay.



What does that mean for producers? Perhaps less than you might think. Peter Ywema, General Manager of the SAI Platform, said that in Canada, we are the reverse of other countries. We have the legislative frameworks that cover the social and ethical aspects (e.g. child labour), regulatory and environmental (eg. production practices). But we don’t have the paper trail. While many other countries have that trail they struggle to meet the low expectations of the Farmer Self-Assessment version 2.0. For example, question FSA 13 asks: “When selecting and using varieties do you make an informed choice”? I’ve never met a producer who doesn’t make informed choices on varieties. So, in some areas, the bar is not exceedingly high.

Why is it good news that sustainable sourcing is coming to Canada? As a society, we have the social, ethical, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability in place. Demonstrating good stewardship will soon be a requirement in all sectors and offers Alberta (and Canada) a competitive advantage in the global marketplace. I believe sustainable sourcing will mean two things to producers.

**One**, we need to document what we do and this has been echoed by producers. Here at Alberta EFP, we are trying to make this easier; we are updating our WebBook, and planning to make it easier for producers to fill in and update information. For example, we are developing our online version so you can enter your legal land location and the WebBook will access maps, soils data, and maybe more. We know that this is the “hard part” quite often and we aim to make it easier.

**Two**, there may be a verification step or even an audit process for some industries. Will everyone be “verified” or audited? Some sectors may require it, but the sheer number of farms (≈ 43,000 in Alberta) makes that unlikely. For the environmental component, AEFP has trained technicians who have said they can, and will audit/verify if it’s required.

Alberta’s agricultural community has long been a leader in adopting more sustainable practices. We can easily demonstrate to the food industry and consumers that Alberta producers are excellent stewards of the land. By doing that, we can become the preferred source for agricultural products, all while maintaining healthy profits. It’s time for us to get ready for sustainable sourcing and make it one of the best things that’s happened to Alberta’s agricultural industry.

## Environmental Farm Plans

Many Alberta producers are wondering if they need a current Environmental Farm Plan (EFP). The EFP is meant to be reviewed and upgraded regularly for each operation. It’s simple to do. The program is coordinated by the ARECA and EFP technicians are available across the province. A completed EFP is required for the On-Farm Stewardship categories of the Growing Forward 2 program. Stewardship is being tied to business opportunities and it is good to be prepared. There are many other reasons to complete an EFP too, including having a hard copy record of the environmental status of your operation, becoming more aware of the rules and regulations concerning the environmental impacts on farms including protecting water resources and air quality. EFPs can also contribute to the environmental sustainability of crop and livestock operations. Updating your EFP shows your commitment to being good stewards of the land and your commitment to meeting consumer expectations and food safety. By establishing that food is produced in an environmentally sustainable way in Alberta, also positions Alberta to be competitive in world markets.

Producers can use an online workbook. This workbook carries data entered to all areas of the plan where it is needed, provides quick access to information sources, ensures each section is complete prior to moving to the next and allows the EFP technician to see what is completed, answer questions and assist with finishing the plan.

**To get started on an EFP, contact PCBFA, or attend one of our upcoming EFP workshops!**

## Contact us for:

- Project Ideas
- Feed Testing

- Growing Forward 2 Assistance
- Ration Formulation Help

- Environmental Farm Plans
- Past Project Information

# Upcoming Events!

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## **Peace Country Classic**

*March 10-12, 2016*

*10am-5pm*

*Beef Market Update with Anne Wasko, Mar 11th, 10 am registration  
Evergreen Park, Grande Prairie*

## **Solar Workshop**

*March 10, 2016*

*9:30am Registration*

*Agriplex- High Prairie*

*\$25/Member, \$35/Non-Member*

## **EFP & Growing Forward 2 Workshops**

*March 15, PCBFA High Prairie Office*

*March 16, GPRC Campus room TIB 142, Fairview*

*March 17, Saddle Hills County, Location TBA*

*1pm Registration*

*Free to Attend*

## **Peace Country Beef School**

*March 15, 2016*

*Postponed*

## **Sprayer Workshop**

*Week of March 21st*

*MD of Spirit River & MD of Peace*

*More information to come*

## **Succession Planning Workshop with Merle Good**

*March 30, 2016*

*1pm Registration*

*Debolt Community Center*

**For more information, or to register for PCBFA events please call  
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