



Biography:

Dr. Colin Palmer is an Associate Professor of Theriogenology (Animal Reproduction) at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine. Originally from Nova Scotia, Dr. Palmer worked in mixed practices in Ontario and British Columbia and has owned/operated a practice in Saskatchewan. Dr. Palmer along with his wife Kim and children Lauren, Emily and Carter run a herd of purebred Red Angus cattle under the KC Cattle Co. name.

As most readers know I am a theriogenologist (clinical specialist in animal reproduction) working at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine in Saskatoon. A large percentage of my clinical work involves bull fertility, semen evaluation and bull breeding issues and I receive a number of referral cases and over-the-phone referral consultations each year. Having a seed stock operation of my own has certainly enhanced my knowledge and enlightened my perspective especially when dealing with fertility issues in recently purchased animals. As a professional, I have a responsibility to my client, but I also must maintain a fair and impartial view when issues related to warranty arise. A good rule of thumb is "don't make comments that can't be supported". I am especially passionate when it comes to the question of heritability. An unsubstantiated claim that a breeding related problem is heritable can severely damage a seed stock producer's reputation and undoubtedly put him or her in a difficult position when trying to make it right.

Offering warranty or a breeder's guarantee is a well-accepted practice in the breeding bull business. With increasing competition and the push to be rewarded well for their efforts, seed stock operations that offer more usually have the best bull sales with a high proportion of their bulls going to repeat buyers. From what I have seen, the warranties provided by beef seed stock producers are arguably the most generous in the agricultural sector. So why mess with a good thing?

I will apologize in advance if this article upsets you. My intent is to generate discussion rather than to create enemies. Here are some of my questions:

I wonder if there is too much warranty nowadays? What should be reasonably expected of a bull supplier? What about the breeding soundness evaluations - are they being interpreted correctly? Should we insist that bull buyers be held more accountable?

Personally, I think that too much is being given away under the guise of customer service. Metaphorically speaking, in a number of cases, valuable equipment is being improperly used, maintained and stored with the expectation that it can be replaced at full value and at no extra cost. Most if not all bull sales I have been to spell out the terms of their guarantee and have insurance agents available offering a full spectrum of policies from life and injury to future fertility including loss of use clauses. I see many seedstock operations carefully tweaking the terms of their guarantees to ensure that they treat their buyers fairly while avoiding the pitfall of giving away bulls for free. A very innovative seed stock operation has created its own tiered insurance program that is coupled with their breeders guarantee. Details of the guarantee are spelled out clearly and precisely and buyers must decide what level of protection they are comfortable with. Initial impressions are that it was well-received by the bull buyers and a source has told me that it has worked as well, or perhaps even better than expected. I would like to encourage all bull sellers to move to a more detailed warranty program and suggest that they put more responsibility on the buyers to purchase insurance.

I am a fervent believer in the value of bull breeding soundness evaluations. There is no better way to identify infertile and subfertile bulls, but beyond that the semen test, as it is more commonly known, has become as, if not more, expected than the transfer of registration papers in the bull business. One thing that must be kept in mind, however, is that semen tests most accurately represent the status of sperm production on the day of the exam. In other words, if there is an injury, illness or any sort of significant stress that occurs subsequent to the exam the effect on the sperm picture could be enough to affect breeding performance. A new environment, a drastic change in feed quality, being placed in a pen with older bulls are just a few examples of stressors. In my opinion, any failed breeding soundness evaluation within 6 months of the initial presale evaluation should be assessed in conjunction with the original, pre-sale examination including an independent assessment of both semen smears. In most cases, if the bull received a satisfactory classification on the first evaluation, and that classification was correct, then a subsequent questionable (decision deferred) or unsatisfactory classification is not the fault of the breeder. Some defects, for example diadem vacuoles and knobbed acrosomes, should be monitored for up to 6 months as some individuals may be prone to expressing these defects. Clauses regarding replacement of the affected bull for that period of time need to be included. Be careful when follow-up examinations are conducted. I have data that shows that 25% fewer bulls had satisfactory semen quality in January verses July. More bulls will pass a breeding soundness evaluation in June and July than in December, January, February and March.

The ability to mount and complete service is not evaluated during a standard breeding soundness evaluation and the onus is put on the bull owner to observe breeding behavior. Breeding related concerns should be conveyed to the breeder within 6 weeks (2 estrus cycles) of turnout. Bulls should always be observed frequently during the breeding season; in well-managed herds most of the cows should be cycling at turnout, therefore, cow fertility will be less likely to confound the issue. In other words, maybe the bull is not the problem or he is only part of the problem. Furthermore, if a problem is evident a replacement bull can be put in quickly before the entire breeding season is lost. Breeding related and musculoskeletal injuries are also not the responsibility of the breeder. Issues surrounding temperament, sex drive, aggressiveness towards other bulls are often the most difficult to resolve and probably should be handled on a case by case basis, but again within say 6 months of purchase.

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Bull Warranty: What should be expected?

A Breeder's...: Veterinary Perspective