

Bull breeding soundness examination

As you stand leaning on the gate on this balmy July evening with a cold beverage in hand admiring your cattle, ask yourself a few questions Has your breeding season been as fruitful as it could be? Are there cows that mysteriously calved later than expected or not at all? Do you have a uniform group of well grown healthy calves? Is your calving interval creeping up and your pregnancy rates reduced?

If these questions have left you scratching your head it's time to consider the 'main man' and his influence on your herd.

Your bull is essentially half your herd and probably your most expensive asset. Figures from the SAC show the average cost of keeping a bull is £1000/year and as such he needs to earn his keep. He is equally as important as all your other cattle put together, yet sadly he is lucky to receive half the attention. Look after him, and he will look after you. A bull's influence on dairy and beef herd fertility is often overlooked with the focus mainly on cow infertility. If your cow and infectious disease management is good, the limiting factor in your herd fertility maybe bull rather than female factors.

While infertile bulls are rare, studies show that 20% or more are sub-fertile. Walters and Thomson analysed 560 bull breeding examinations and found 30.1% of pre-breeding and pre-purchase examinations performed resulted in the animal failing. Of these, 47.7% had abnormalities undetectable on clinical examination alone. These results are consistent with similar data collected from other studies (Eppink 2005, Barth and Walder 2002, McGowan et al. 2002). A fully fertile bull running with 40-50 cows should achieve an average pregnancy rate of 60%. In a 9 week period, at least 94% should be pregnant. The effect of a sub-fertile bull can be catastrophic and costly. An extended calving period, increased labour costs, variable calf age and subsequent high disease incidence leads to significant reductions in farm profits, many more grey hairs and sleepless nights.

At Westpoint Farm Vets we encourage pre-purchase testing and annual breeding soundness testing of bulls before your breeding season. Progressive farms use annual breeding soundness examinations as a vital management tool to improve productivity and reduce costs of lower herd fertility.



The safest standard way to collect semen from a bull is by electro-ejaculation. This takes about an hour and requires safe handling facilities to be available, and somewhere close by and sheltered with a power point to set up an in-field lab area. Most of the procedure is done on farm, giving you a quick idea of your bull's ability. Remember boys, size really does matter! The rest is done in our lab, assessing the motility and percentage of normal sperm indicating the quality of the sperm sample.

This gives a snap shot in time. It does not assess libido and will not guarantee fertility throughout the breeding season. Any bull not initially passing the examination should be retested 2 months later. If there is still an unsatisfactory result then culling is recommended.

Disease testing for BVD, Leptospirosis, IBR and Johne's disease should also be carried out pre-purchase and before introducing any bull into your herd.

Proactive health planning for bulls with your vet can help avoid the massive risk and significant losses associated with sub-fertile and infertile bulls.

For more information and to arrange a fertility examination on your bull, please contact your local Westpoint practice on 01637 889231 (St Columb) or 01566 86985 (Launceston) or visit www.westpointfarmvets.co.uk.

Emma Holmes BVM&S MRCVS
Westpoint Veterinary Group