

Are you getting the most from your bull...?

All arable farmers have a cropping calendar and most sheep & beef farmers have a breeding calendar dictating; when the bulls go in, when vaccinations are to be undertaken to have maximum effect, when calving/lambing is going to start and stop etc.; but how many of us have a Bull Calendar to maximise our return from our bulls?

Latest research shows that not only do 26.7% of bulls fail a pre-breeding examination, but that the proportion of failures or referrals significantly increases as bulls age from 19.1% at 19-24 months to 32.9% at 5 ½ years old (Walters & Nanjiani 2015). Hence don't rely on historical prowess, as just because your bull worked last year does not mean he will perform adequately this year. Some conditions for example, premature spiral deviation of the penis, although congenital, become significantly more limiting with age and acquired conditions are inevitably more common as animals age.

Did you know that with careful planning, your vet can collect semen for AI straws at the same time as a pre-breeding examination for as little cost of £1 per AI straw and all on your home farm? This could be thought of as an insurance policy to maintain the genetics should the bull go lame or become injured, or die, during the season. It also of course preserves the gene pool for future use by yourself or other farmers, as AI straws can be sold between farms within mainland UK. The semen is collected on farm and then sent for processing into straws by UK Sire Services in Devon with minimal intrusion or hassle at farm level.

For those that use the show circuit to display the quality of their stock pre-sale, not only would you have the bull available for sale, but also several hundred straws of semen already 'in the bank', pre the show season as semen quality is much better from a "fit and working" rather than "show condition" animal. Also with semen collected pre-season, there is no delay in collection as usually before processing semen into straws quarantine periods have to be adhered to and hence if animals have been away on the show circuit there will be a delay before collection can take place.

Cost benefit analysis dictates that **all** bulls, resident or new, should undergo a pre-breeding examination every year, including a foot trim, at least 6 weeks prior to being required to work. The cost of the pre breeding examination and foot trim equates in most cases to approximately the value of a single quality beef calf on the floor. However, when considering timing of examination, should you want to collect semen for processing into AI straws at the same time, your vet needs to look to start the process ideally 2 months earlier as a licence has to be obtained from APHA. So if you plan to put your bulls in for spring calving 2017 then you need to be contacting your vet as the New Year celebrations cease!

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