

Bull Management Prior To Mating

Continual discussion takes place regarding the use of bulls in terms of numbers of cows to each bull, how many a young bull should be put to, semen testing and rotation of bulls.

Semen Testing

Increasing numbers of bulls are now being semen tested at least 6 to 8 weeks prior to being put to service. A few years ago 386 beef bulls were examined in south east Scotland with a failure rate of 33% made up from

- Poor quality semen alone 12%
- Clinical defect 21% - from a visual inspection of legs/feet/back and examination of the testicle, penis etc.

This gives assurance that when they were examined they had the semen quality required and were fit for purpose but does not give an indication of libido.

Testing early allows time to purchase a replacement if necessary before the bulling period eg why not think about testing prior to the May bull sales. If not wanting to purchase at a sale then private purchases can be undertaken before the choice of bulls becomes limited.

What About Sub Fertile Bulls?

Those sub-fertile bulls can also be tested again prior to mating to look for improvements in semen. However prior to the retest you are often then left with a dilemma whether to purchase another or wait to the result of the retest. Maybe you have enough bull power anyway if other bulls have passed with flying colours.

If not, it is best to have a bull either purchased or at least ready to be bought if the bull fails a retest. Often they are retested very close to the bulling period. Veterinary advice should be sought at all times. Increasingly therefore the advice is to cull such bulls as soon as possible unless there is any suggestion that they might recover following a short period of rest.

A good policy is to have newly purchased young bulls semen tested.

Bull Power

After the bulls have gone out, problems often occur such as lameness which require another bull to be used. But time after time many farmers fail to have back up and desperately get on the phone looking for another bull to purchase or hire. Most pedigree herd have sold their best and have very few left in months such as June. To hire a bull which has been used on other farms is a health risk and cannot be advised! Too often what is purchased or hired in is a bull that most will say "It will have to do".

Plan B – back up always needs to be in place before the season not during.

Ratio of Cows to a Bull

When the question is asked “How many cows to each bull, the overwhelming answer will be that it should be about 30 to 35 cows to a bull. This still remains true but one of the main reasons this figure came about was simply down to average grass field sizes that existed. Young bulls will often have a guide figure of about 15 to the bull.

With the addition of bull and semen testing advice has advanced to about 50 to 55 cows to a bull which has successfully passed the bull and semen test but it has to be argued if this is a good move or not. Many would agree this could be done but not until after the first 3 weeks that the bulls have been out as 65% should be in calf anyway. It will take time to get many to have the confidence to run at this high ratio.

Rotation of Bulls

1. Some farmers swap their bulls every 21 days (1 cycle) to reduce the risk. If there has been a poor fertility bull it will not be allowed the second cycle with these cows and so a safety measure is put in place. The bull that has not been working then moves into another field but hopefully many of the cows will be already settled and after the next cycle the bull is shifted again. This farmer will be able to do this as he is only working with one breed.

It is harder if different breeds of sire are working to cows for different purposes.

2. Yes! many farmers have not got the time or labour to swap round and if not then they need to make sure they get the new bulls fertility tested if they are to avoid this situation.
3. Having the bull in for 9 weeks realistically gives the majority of cows 3 turns to the bull. Some extend to 10 weeks to cover those cows that return to heat over 21 days. Cows can vary cycling from 18 to 24 days.

Bulling 2010

We are faced with a late turn out in Spring 2010. Many early spring calvers may be in the situation that bulls have to be put to the cows in the sheds prior to turn out.

These cows need to be fed well immediately to allow them to lift to their correct condition and cycle well. Even when the cows are put out to grass they still should continue to be supplemented as sudden diet changes can will affect them cycling/ovulating properly. A few farmers early calving have shown records where there is a gap in calving over a period of about 2 to 3 weeks. When this period is related back to the bulling it is usually always the first 3 weeks they've gone out to grass when their diet has been totally altered and so they failed to conceive.

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