

Stock bull fertility: 10 key considerations



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Four out of every five calves born on beef farms are sired by a stock bull. So, stock bull fertility is vitally important. The stock bull on your farm is key to maintaining a compact calving period, maximising the genetic potential and value of the calf crop, and overall herd profitability.

•**1) Bull fertility check:** a bull's fertility status can change from year to year. Therefore, it is good practice to have a fertility test carried out on the stock bull prior to the start of the breeding season (at the time of writing, this is still possible while bearing in mind COVID-19 restrictions). It is estimated that one stock bull in four is sub-fertile.

The cost of the test is very low, if you compare it to the cost of carrying empty cows for the summer. Results are available before the technician even leaves the yard.

•**2)** A bull must be able to maintain body condition score (ideally BCS 3), repeatedly mount and serve cows for

12 weeks and have a long working life in the herd.

If you have bought a bull, find out from the seller what diet and concentrates he is being fed, and the vaccinations he has received.

•**3)** A blood test is useful to check for BVD, IBR, Johnne's disease and Leptospirosis. If vaccinating or treating for parasites, these should be administered at least six to eight weeks in advance of the breeding season, as they could lead to reduced fertility. Consult your vet for advice on the health of the bull. Remember, a young bull in his first season should serve no more than 20 cows.

•**4)** It is important to avoid sudden changes to diet and not over-feed the bull, as this can reduce fertility and lead to feet problems. He needs to be fit, but not over-fat.

•**5)** In advance of the breeding season, check feet and legs well and take remedial action if required.

•**6)** Watch the bull working to check he is serving cows correctly.

•**7)** If possible, rotate bulls or scan cows early, so that an infertile bull or sub-fertile bull can be identified early.

•**8)** Record when you see a cow being mated and watch for signs of cows coming on heat repeatedly.

•**9)** If a large number of your cows are repeating, you need to take action to find out what is wrong. You must be prepared to start using AI, or if you have a second bull with another group of cows, he may be utilised to serve more cows.

•**10) Pregnancy scanning:** when it is at least 35 days since the last cow in the herd could have been served, then you should consider scanning the cows. It offers many advantages:

• Firstly, it will identify which cows are in-calf and which cows are not. This will allow you to cull empty cows instead of expecting these cows to calve next year.

• Secondly, most scanners are able to give you a good estimate of the number of weeks that each cow has been in-calf. This is extremely helpful when a stock bull is used on the farm to identify expected calving date.

• Thirdly, if the scanning reveals, for example, that more than 5% of your cows are empty, then this may indicate that there is a fertility problem in your herd.

Maybe it was a bull issue, or perhaps a mineral deficiency or a disease problem – either way, it should prompt you to investigate the issue further.