



Stock bull NCT due for renewal

Ciarán Lenehan outlines a stock bull checklist for both new and existing animals

Breeding season will begin in the coming weeks on spring-calving suckler farms. With stock bulls still accounting for the vast majority of calves born in Ireland, we need to make sure they're working for us. Look at a bull the same way you'll look at a car. You'll service it every year to make sure it won't let you down and if you're buying a new one you'll make sure it is in good working order first.

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Checking
Keep an eye on your bull, particularly around the three week mark. Lots of repeats should sound alarm bells. If in doubt, get him out and fertility tested. Hesitancy can be disastrous here.

What's his job?

What is our end goal with the bull's progeny? Is he a bull we're going to keep replacements off or one that needs to produce a €1,000 weanling – because finding one to do both is exceedingly difficult and we don't have to compromise.

Figures and genotyping

Ideally the bull should hold at least four stars on either the replacement or terminal index, depending on what his job is. Buying a bull that's not genotyped was recently described as “madness” by Chris Daly of ICBF at one of our BETTER farm walks. For me, the one figure we focus on is calving ease – ideally being sub 5% for heifers and sub 8% for mature cows. Some will go higher or lower based on their circumstances. If the bull is a replacement-breeder, we need to be wary that his milk and fertility figures are going to improve what's in our herd. A bull for weanlings should have high conformation and carcase weight figures.



VIDEO ONLINE
Roscommon BETTER farmer Padraig O'Connor bought a bull recently. We talk to him about the bull and what he looked for. Watch the video on farmersjournal.tv

Fertility test

A no-brainer. A bull bought at a sale will typically come with a fertility certificate, bound by insurance. If buying a bull direct from a breeder, make sure he's tested for fertility and mineral status by a vet. Bear in mind that a bull's fertility status can change – just look what happened to us on Tullamore Farm last year.



Feet

Check bulls for evidence of excessive paring as this can lead to problems in future.

Head

Ideally we want a small, sweet head on our bull.



Legs

We want our bull to walk with a free range of movement, so make sure to see him do lots of walking before you purchase. Look for a strong stance with straight legs and good balance. Power in the legs is important, particularly the back ones as they're to support him when he's working.

Conformation

Length, depth and width are desirable in a bull, but note that excessive width in the front shoulder or back end could indicate a difficult calver.

Docility

We want to avoid nervous or aggressive animals for obvious reasons. Note that a normally quiet bull can become territorial during the breeding season. Bulls can turn wicked as the years progress. There have already been fatalities this year – there is absolutely no argument for keeping a cross bull, no matter how good his calves are.



Testicles

Check to ensure the bull has two firm, even testicles free from any lumps. It should feel like handling tennis balls. Bulls older than 15 months should have a scrotal circumference of greater than 30cm, while two-year-olds should have a 34cm circumference.

Health

Your bulls should get the same vaccinations as your breeding herd. He should also get the necessary treatments for parasites both internally and externally. Bulls that have worked in other herds need to be health tested before use. They have an increased risk of introducing disease, including campylobacter. Have them blood tested for BVD and Johne's disease and ask your vet to sheath-wash them.

Nutrition and condition

A bull should be going to work in moderate-to-good condition – not too warm but not in his working clothes either. This translates to a score of 3-3.5 on a typical BCS scale. If a new bull comes on to the farm, find out what his diet was pre-sale – it will likely have been high in starchy concentrates. Gradually bring him down from high feeding rates as this can lead to movement problems, reduced semen quality and diminished libido. Supplement good-quality forage with 2-3kg of high fibre, 14% crude protein concentrate, depending on body condition in the two to three weeks prior to working. Remember to include a mineral supplement in the diet.

Management

House new bulls with other stock. Cull cows are ideal for this job. Get him out to grass two to three weeks in advance of the breeding season to acclimatise him to new surroundings, a new diet and so that you can monitor him working if he's with culls. Don't forget about him when the breeding season is over – he's the most expensive animal on your farm after all.