

Getting your bull in good shape for breeding time

Everyone's talking about bull MOTs – what are they?

As we head into the busy spring period it is worth spending some time thinking about the upcoming breeding season. An important piece of the puzzle can be suffering from benign neglect (out of sight, out of mind) – the bull.

His only job is, on paper, a very simple one – to get cows in calf within the ideal nine to 12-week window. To achieve acceptable pregnancy rates, many different factors must be right such as good nutritional management, effective disease control and successful heifer integration into the herd. That said, the best management in the world can't stop an under-performing bull from having a huge impact on farm profitability for several years to come.

So how many of you stop to check the

BULL MOT

Andrew Crutchley, right, who works with the Westmorland Veterinary Group, says check the health of your bull

bull(s) are still up to the job?

A pre-breeding soundness examination is an essential tool to help ensure the future profitability of your herd.

He worked fine last year, surely he doesn't need testing?

Unfortunately, just because he did a good job last year, it does not mean he is fit for purpose this year. This is especially true if he has been lame or off colour since the last breeding season, as any condition that results in him running a temperature can result in reduced fertility.

How many bulls are under performing?

While it is rare for a bull to be completely infertile, as many as 30 per cent of bulls are classed as sub fertile. This means that he is capable of getting cows in calf but will struggle to handle his share of the cows or a short breeding period (nine weeks).

Who should I be testing and when should I test?

Ideally, every breeding bull should be tested every year, including any bought in or replacement bulls. They should be tested four to six weeks prior to the start of the breeding season to ensure no changes in fertility have occurred since last year.

It is important to allow



enough time to source and test any replacement bulls that may be required.

What does a Bull Breeding Soundness Examination (BBSE) consist of?

A BBSE includes a full physical examination with particular attention given to the reproductive tract, including examination of the testicles and internal sex glands, collection of a semen sample (often by electro ejaculation) and detailed analysis of the

semen carried out under a microscope.

This entire service can be carried out on farm during a single visit.

What are the downsides of a sub fertile bull?

The most obvious downside to a bull that isn't working properly is more empty cows and an extended calving pattern. This leads to higher cull rates, more calf health issues as mixed age calves are gradually born and an increased

workload for you. This is not to mention the cost of keeping an infertile bull (or additional bulls to cover for one not working properly).

What are the benefits of keeping a tight calving pattern (i.e. having a fertile bull)?

Maintaining a tight calving pattern has many advantages for the farm business. Some of these advantages include:

- Larger, uniform groups of calves for sale which means improved feeding efficiency, finishing and marketing.
- Improved disease control and vaccination management
- Improved ability to rear own replacements
- Improved herd fertility – more fit cows to breed at the start of mating
- Possibly reduced cases of dystocia (difficult calving)
- Easier calving workload and management.

Remember your bull is half your herd.