



Vet Maarten Boers from The Livestock Partnership, based in West Sussex, takes a look at bull fertility and urges producers to test their stock bull first if cows are failing to get in calf, and to avoid issues like excessive work and over feeding.

Bull health, nutrition and age are all key to fertility

Put a spring in his step

s your stock bull ready for the spring? Bulls only represent between 2% and 5% of your breeding stock, but are responsible for 50% of the herd's fertility.

I have tested more than 1,300 bulls in my career and have seen many unusual things. Bulls with a single testicle are more common that I imagined and I've seen strange penis deviations, with some shaped like a corkscrew. Tiny testicles can also be a problem – yes, size does matter! Poor semen quality can also be a problem and I've even seen some that's mixed with pus. And a significant issue behind sub or infertility, which I often see, is lameness.

Whatever the cause of sub or infertility, left undetected it could have a disastrous effect. It is always worth carrying out regular pre breeding soundness examinations. This proactive, rather than reactive, approach will mean that fewer herds will feel the impact of infertile or sub fertile bulls. Having said that the figure still stands at one in seven bulls being 'unfit for purpose'.

Sub fertile are worse than infertile bulls, as they're more difficult to spot. An infertile bull will test as having very few, if any, sperm swimming. A sub-fertile bull will have between 20% and 30% 'healthy' sperm and, as a result, will still get the odd cow or heifer pregnant – it will just take three or four times longer than it should. In this instance, the cows often get the blame.

Bull checks

My advice is to look at the bull first – it's a quick and easy procedure. And then, if you can be sure that he's not the problem, you can start to look at the more complicated cows issues that may be causing the problem.

Many of the bulls condemned in 2013 had been found to be fertile in previous years. This proves the point that subfertility and sterility often happens in later years. It is essential that these bulls are identified before losses have occurred. Good fertility in one season does not guarantee good fertility for the following season.

Bulls aged between two and six years are ideal. Younger than that and they're 'immature'. And, as a rule of thumb, a bull can cope with as many 'girls' as his age in months, up to a maximum of 50 cows and heifers for a mature bull.

Over working a bull is a common cause of sub fertility. I see far too many producers go out and buy an 18 month old bull and then put him in with 50 cows. He'll start off enthusiastically, but then get tired very quickly. And it will take several months for him to fully recover again.

Penile injury is another cause of infertility – I've seen things that will make your eyes water. Hoof health also plays a key



role. Producers rarely have the facilities to treat a lame bull, so foot problems are often left. Bacterial infections, be they in the foot or anywhere else, will also directly affect semen quality. Bacteria in the bloodstream can track to the testicles and I've seen bulls ejaculate pus.

Weight issues

Over feeding bulls can also cause problems. A maintenance only ration, of silage and/or hay, is ideal. Ruminal acidosis will affect semen quality and if a bull is too well fed he'll become fat and lazy. An overweight bull can also become a 'cow killer'. He'll squash cows or knock them over.

Over condition affects libido too. The testicles are kept outside the body cavity for a reason – to keep them cool. Too much fat insulation around the testicles will affect sperm count. As will any disease that causes a raised temperature. Sperm count can be lowered for up to six weeks following a fever.