



**Better Returns
Programme**

Bull health and fertility before and after purchase

It is often said, quite correctly, that the bull is half the herd. This suggests that he should be regarded as being as important as all the other stock put together. Yet in practice he is often lucky if he receives half the care and attention of the other stock.



This leaflet offers advice on how to care for the health and fertility of what is probably the most expensive asset in your herd – the stock bull.



Before you buy

Buy the right genetics – using EBVs

Before purchasing a new stock bull consider which genetics you wish to introduce into your herd and when you will be using him.

The identification and utilisation of superior breeding stock is an excellent and permanent way to improve your herd's genetics, and your financial returns. Many bulls, notably those from pedigree herds, will have Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs) for the main production parameters.



Biosecurity is paramount

It is vital to consider diseases that the bull might be carrying or be exposed to upon arrival at a new farm. Discuss biosecurity with your veterinary surgeon *before* you purchase a bull.

Enquire about the health status of the herd from which you are buying – notably on tuberculosis, Johne's disease, infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) and leptospirosis.

Pre-purchase health checks

- Pre-purchase blood tests are advised. It is important, for example, to establish the bull's IBR status and that he is not persistently infected with BVD. Information should also be sought about results of any monitoring of Johne's disease in the bull's herd of origin.
- Vaccines are available for many of the diseases that the bull may be exposed to on your farm or at sale. So, if he is naive and is not already vaccinated, this should be done before he joins your herd. Your veterinary surgeon can help you to formulate a vaccination protocol.



- Be aware that bulls can be transiently infectious (including semen) after recent exposure to a disease (eg BVD) and therefore pose a risk for a period whilst immunity develops.
- Venereal campylobacter can be an economically crippling disease and can be a particular risk when hiring bulls. It is strongly advised that any new bulls are sheath washed and treated to prevent transmission.

Fertility, soundness and condition

Ideally a breeding soundness examination should be undertaken prior to purchase. As far as reproduction goes – size does matter, but it is the size of the testicles, rather than of any other anatomical feature. Scrotal circumference is a good 'rule of thumb' indicator of a bull's capacity. You should be looking for 30cm plus in bulls aged 15 months or older.



Minimum 30cm circumference

Carefully assess conformation, feet and body condition score at the sale. Bulls at sales are often in very good (show) body condition but are too fat to work and

this could have an effect on the bull's semen quality. Bulls 'fit to work' should have a body condition score of 3.5 with minimal surplus fat. It can take four to six weeks to lose extra show condition, so allow plenty of time for the bull to adjust before he is required to work.

Once the bull is on your farm

Isolation and accommodation

Place the newly purchased bull in isolation for a minimum of 21 days and do not release him into the herd until you have negative results on the tests stated in this leaflet.

During the isolation period the bull should be kept in comfortable surroundings. Ideally he should be able to familiarise himself with the sights and sounds of the farm and preferably be able to see the cows.

The bull should have access to an area of hard-core or concrete for three to four weeks before use, especially if he has been kept on grass or straw prior to purchase. This will allow the feet to toughen up before he has to start working.

Bulls with excessive body condition can be prone to laminitis. It is advisable to have a suitably large, comfortable lying area.

Nurition

Maintain the bull on his current diet and gradually introduce any new feed. This will minimise stress and maintain rumen health.

Handling

So that the bull is both familiar with, and positive about, being handled, he should be put through handling facilities regularly and rewarded with a feed.

Post-arrival health checks and treatment

- The diseases to be tested for depend on circumstances. For example, if pre-purchase testing for BVD proved the bull is not a PI, then a post-arrival test may not be necessary.

However, if the bull was tested negative for IBR virus and there is a possibility he



may have been exposed to IBR infection since the test date, for example at the sale, then a post-arrival test is essential.

- Ideally the bull should have been vaccinated for diseases present endemically on your farm before arrival. If not, do this as soon as possible after arrival.
- bathing should be carried out on the day of arrival and on the next two days to reduce the risk of digital dermatitis.
- The bull should be wormed and treated for ectoparasites such as lice, upon arrival.
- Sheath washes and treatment with suitable doses of an appropriate antibiotic by injection should be carried out before use to prevent transmission of campylobacter. Your vet will advise on the detail of treatment protocols but, as a general rule, the bull should be treated for three consecutive days. The injectable antibiotic treatment will also reduce the carriage of leptospirosis in the kidneys and, in this situation, it is

often recommended to repeat the course of injections two weeks later.

- Watch new animals for the development of 'transit fever' or pasteurellosis. This bacterium is normally present in the respiratory tract but can become pathogenic in animals which are stressed or have poor or suppressed immunity. It can colonise the lungs and lead to sudden death.

It is relatively easy to treat with antibiotics but needs to be treated early. Any signs of dullness, poor appetite or respiratory distress should be treated quickly.

Fertility

Breeding soundness examinations should be repeated annually before each breeding season (see section on Before you Buy) as a fertile bull one year may not be fertile the next. In addition, semen should be collected and examined, both physically and microscopically, for volume, density and motility.



Your bull can make a great contribution to your business: look after him and he will look after you.

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While the authors, the NBA and EBLEX have made every effort to present accurate and up-to-date guidance in this leaflet, they cannot be held responsible for errors or omissions. Those buying bulls should also seek advice from their veterinary surgeon.

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