

CHAPTER 5: Notes on the preparation of bulls and cows prior to the summer breeding season

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BULLS

The bull is the most important link in the chain of producing the maximum number of calves in the breeding season. It is therefore of the utmost importance to ensure that they are fertile and able to serve cows ahead of the breeding season. They should also be adapted to their environment.

New bulls should be bought a few months before the breeding season so that they can adapt to the new surroundings and sort out their dominance in case of multi-sire herds.

It is imperative that bulls be tested for fertility prior to breeding, as the use of a subfertile bull (one with poor quality semen) could result in great financial losses. Even if such a bull is used in a multi-sire herd, he may be the dominant bull and keep the other bulls away from the cows.

The bulls should be kept in good condition, but not too fat. Fat bulls often have poorer semen quality due to fat deposition around the scrotum and they are usually not as active as leaner bulls.

An adult bull can cover 25-30 cows in a 3 month breeding season. Young bulls must be well looked after and not be given more than 20-25 cows, as they are still growing.

Vaccinate bulls against *Campylobacter* (Vibriosis) with a double dose, at least 3 months before the breeding season. Ensure that they are vaccinated against Lumpy skin disease, as this disease could cause sterility. If fertility problems have occurred in the herd, test bulls for *Campylobacter* and *Trichomonas*. It is especially important to test older bulls that have been working in other herds.

Remember that any fever reaction could cause a bull to be sterile and that it may take 2-3 months for such a bull to produce good quality semen.

COWS AND HEIFERS

Planning ahead for the breeding season is very important, bearing in mind the following points. The ideal situation is for every cow to produce a viable calf each year of her productive lifespan.

Heifers must be put with the bulls at least one month ahead of the cows. This is to make sure that they conceive early to give enough time for them to recover and be in calf within a year. Special attention should be paid to heifers, especially during the latter third of pregnancy and the time immediately thereafter. They should receive the best grazing, provided they don't become too fat during the last three months of pregnancy. During this time the calf grows quickly and fat animals may have difficulty in calving down.

Consider the following principles before the breeding season:

1. Condition at service is one of the most important factors deciding whether a cow or heifer will conceive (the ideal condition score is 3 to 3.5). Heifers should receive special attention after calving, since they struggle to reach this goal whilst still growing and feeding a calf. Keep the best grazing for the heifers and provide good licks to ensure that they reach the ideal condition score. The ideal situation is to manage the heifers as a separate herd.
2. Vaccinations and other procedures should be finished well in advance of the breeding season to minimise stress during this period.
3. Observe bulls during the breeding season to make sure that they are able to serve properly. The herdsman should note dates of service — this way it is easy to tell if cows are repeatedly served. If cows return to heat regularly (21-24 days), the problem most likely lies with the bull, but if they return at irregular intervals, the cause may be some sexually transmitted disease.
4. Only buy cows and heifers from reputable breeders who keep good fertility records and manage their herds well. New cows should be tested, at least for Brucellosis, before introduction into the herd.
5. All replacement heifers should be vaccinated against Bovine viral diarrhoea (live vaccine), twice before going to the bull. For more information, please contact your nearest vet.

Good planning and special attention to bulls and cows/heifers, as described above, will ensure a profitable livestock enterprise.