

THREE RIVERS VETERINARY GROUP

FARM ANIMAL PRACTICE

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BULL FERTILITY

Fertility performance is central to profitability to both beef and dairy farmers. Many farmers concentrate on the cow, and when asked about the bull the common answer we get is "well we've never had a problem with him getting cows in calf". Just because a bull gets a cow in calf doesn't mean he is fully fertile. Completely infertile bulls are relatively rare, but studies have shown that more than 20% of unselected bulls are sub-fertile; this means he will still be getting some cows in calf but may only be achieving 30-40% conception rates rather than the 60% we should be aiming for. This will have a direct effect on profitability. Non-pregnant cows are simply a drain on resources which is often overlooked as it is difficult to assess the direct cost, but it most certainly is a direct cost to your business.

BEEF FARMERS

The target for seasonal calving herds is 95 calves from every 100 cows with a 9 week mating period. The longer the breeding period the lower the calf weaning weights. In a 2005 EBLEX study, calves from a 9 week breeding herd were 70kgs heavier than calves from an average herd (19 week mating period) at weaning. This highlights the inefficiency of simply running the bull with the cows for an extended period to get more in-calf. The fact of the matter is, early born calves equal more profit. In order to achieve this you require the correct number of bulls (one bull to 30-40 cows) and they need to be fully fertile and up to the job.

DAIRY FARMERS

A bull's fertility is not something that is set in stone, it can decrease and increase due to a whole raft of factors including; work load, feeding, presence of other bulls, temperature, and stress. So just because he is or was getting cows pregnant doesn't mean he has no fertility issues. A sweeper bull's workload is never constant, there will naturally be times when

lots of cows are coming on bull and other times when it is quieter. In quieter times a sub-fertile bull may be able to cope but when he gets busy conception rates will fall, meaning more open days for cows and extended calving interval which increases feed costs/litre and reduces milk yields across a cow's lifetime.

BREEDING SOUNDNESS EXAM

In response to increased reliance on bulls particularly in the dairy sector, we at Three Rivers are now offering bull breeding soundness examinations and semen evaluation. Our breeding examinations are conducted according to the British Cattle Veterinary Association guidelines and involve a clinical exam covering musculo-skeletal defects, jaw and eye assessment, external genitalia examination, scrotal measurement, internal accessory gland assessment and full semen exam. To evaluate the semen of a bull we employ state of the art electro-ejaculation techniques and microscopic examination on farm. We recommend beef bulls to be examined 8-10 weeks before the planned start of mating as it takes 8 weeks for sperm to mature, thus if there is a problem with your bull it may take this long for him to become fully fertile again. Dairy bulls should be examined at least annually, and **ALL BULLS** should be examined before purchase.

Electro-ejaculation requires us to use an electric probe which is placed in the rectum of the bull and generates a small electrical charge, it is not a painful procedure if used correctly and allows us to test animals that are difficult to handle and does not require you to have an 'on bull' cow available. We do require you to have a suitable crush with a side access, and an electric outlet and shelter is preferable but not essential.

If you are concerned about your bull's fertility or have any questions about bull breeding examinations please do not hesitate to contact Jim or Mike at the clinic and we will be more than happy to offer advice and assistance.