

INTRODUCING A VIRGIN BULL TO COWS

It is important to carefully prepare young bulls for their first mating season to ensure both -

- **The bull get as many cows pregnant as quickly as possible, and**
- **He does no temporary/permanent damage to himself, shortening his working life.**

PREPARATIONS

It is essential that the bull is purchased and on the farm where he is going to work at least 12 weeks before mating is due to start and preferably sooner. This will allow the minimum quarantine period of four weeks with the further period used to house the bull were he can smell cows from his pen. With semen production taking nine weeks it also allows the bull to fully recover from the stress of marketing, changing environment etc.

Ideally the bull will have been purchased from a breeder participating in one of the National Cattle Health Schemes so his health status will be known and he will possibly have been fully vaccinated prior to sale. If this is not the case the bull should be tested and where appropriate, vaccinated as soon as he is brought home and put into quarantine.

At the same time it would be sensible to semen test the bull using the modern electro ejaculation equipment which most large animal practices now own. It is much better to pay the fee for this and find out before mating starts that the young bull has either poor quality semen or has limited semen reserves (small testicles) rather than wait until six weeks after mating has started to investigate what the problem is with a large number of cows coming back into season.

House the bull where a proportion of his pen is clean concrete to help keep his feet trim and hard.

Where bulls will be working at grass, turn them out into a well fenced paddock as soon as possible to get them fully acclimatised to grazing. Discuss with your vet the possibility of worming them with a long acting product/bolus as they are turned out with the cows.

Handle the bull and give him a thorough examination, or ask your vet to do it, paying particular attention to mouth, feet and testicles. Testicles should be firm and in a young bull have a circumference of at least 34cm. (Vets will automatically give bulls a full physical examination as part of the semen evaluation service.)

THE MATING GROUP

Young bulls can have low reserves of semen (this is why they should be tested) so traditional advice has been to restrict the size of their mating group to between 10-15 cows. This also means that the fertility of the young bull can be easily checked—by seeing how many cows come back in season during the second cycle. It will also be clear which calves he has sired. However, because young bulls repeatedly serve cows in season, their fertility can still fall as the mating season progresses.

An alternative approach is to run the bull with a normal sized group of 30-35 cows for a shorter time period, eg one cycle. The fertility of the young bull can again be checked by seeing how many cows come back into season during the second cycle but knowing the exact sire of calves born in weeks three and four of the calving period will be difficult unless different breeds of bull are used.

It is crucial to check the size of cows the young bull is to run with—make sure he is physically capable of mating them. If the young bull is more than an inch shorter at the withers compared to the cow then his fertility is likely to be reduced due to physical difficulties as well as increasing the risk of causing damage to himself. Where very young bulls are being used it may therefore be sensible to run them with bulling heifers. Although tradition says not to run inexperienced males with inexperienced females, I can see little justification for this statement having watched many groups of young bulling heifers and entire bulls enthusiastically practising their reproduction techniques!

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