

Ask the Vet: Why should I get my bulls fertility tested?

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Cattle producers obtain their income from selling calves. If you remember back to your high school health class, it takes a male and a female to make a baby, so a fertile bull is half the equation. However, the bull becomes even more important because in livestock production we typically have a small number of males running with a considerably larger number of females. Therefore, a 'dud' bull can result in few or no pregnancies despite perfectly healthy cows. A mature bull should be able to easily service up to 40 cows, though many producers use many more bulls as 'insurance' in case of fertility problems. The cost of purchasing and maintaining these extra bulls can be quite significant.

Fertility testing of bulls is a fairly simple procedure. We use an electrical stimulus to induce a semen sample from the bull. Then we examine the sperm under a microscope. Ideally, there is a large concentration of 'motile' sperm, which means there are a lot of little guys alive and swimming around. We then turn the microscope up to a higher power and examine a few of the sperm individually to see that they have developed correctly and do not have any abnormalities that would impair their ability to fertilize an egg.

One thing that I try to emphasize when fertility testing is that it is simply a snapshot of the bull's performance at this point in time. If your bull is good today, an injury or abnormally hot weather could cause him to become infertile at any time. The bright side is that most infertility is temporary, though it can take several weeks to return to normal. If something would happen in the middle of your breeding season, calving could be delayed by a couple of months.

We recommend fertility testing your bulls shortly before you turn them out with the cows. If you wait until pregnancy testing in the fall to find out that your bull was no good, it is already too late. We have seen some cases this spring where a significant number of bulls have been infertile at testing, for whatever reason. Hopefully these animals will have improved in a few weeks when we retest them. We also have the ability to test rams prior to turn out with the ewes. As sheep have a more seasonal breeding pattern, however, timing is more important for an accurate result.