

Replacement strategy – stock bulls

Of the 27,600 herds involved in the Beef Data and Genomics Programme (BDGP), some 20,000 herds have a stock bull. So what are the scheme requirements regarding having an eligible stock bull and what should participants consider when replacing their stock bull?

The scheme requires participants using a stock bull to have an eligible stock bull on the farm on the key date of 30 June 2019. An eligible stock bull is defined as a breeding bull (>12 months of age) that is: (i) genotyped and is (ii) 4 or 5 stars for either the replacement or terminal index, on a within- or across-breed basis.

Looking at the bulls on the recent BDGP reports, some 75% of these are already meeting the 4/5 star requirement, with a proportion of these already genotyped. ICBF expects to finish out the genotyping of all stock bulls on scheme herds in the next two to three months as part of the current tissue sampling process. At that stage we will be sending out updated BDGP reports (spring 2016), where in addition to identifying the 4- and 5-star bulls, we will also be identifying those that are genotyped and on that basis defined as eligible for the scheme (provided that the bull is still on the farm on 30 June 2019). It's at that stage that herd-owners will be able to make a definitive decision regarding what they plan to do with their stock bull (or bulls).

Whilst most of the bulls on farms are eligible (some 75%), a high proportion of these will have to be replaced in any case due to age considerations (the average length of time that a bull stays on farm is about 3.5 breeding seasons). So invariably

most scheme participants will find themselves buying a bull at some stage over the next five years, either because their current eligible bull is getting too old, or their current bull is ineligible.

Will there be enough eligible bulls for purchase?

The ICBF is confident there will be more than enough available. Based on the figures above, scheme herds will need about 6,000 stock bulls per year. Currently there are 14,000 pedigree bulls registered per year, with 10,500 of these deemed eligible for the scheme.

What should I focus on when buying a bull?

The major decision herd-owners have to make is whether they want the bull to breed potential female replacements (ie, the bull is 4 or 5 stars on the replacement index) or whether they only want the bull to breed animals for sale/slaughter (ie 4 or 5 stars on the terminal index). To make this decision, they will have to consider the current position of their herd, with regard to number of 4- or 5-star females. Again, based on data from BDGP reports, 80% of herds are on target to meet their 2018 and 2020 replacement female requirements based on existing females. However, closer analysis of BDGP reports shows a high proportion of these eligible females are older cows, which may not be on the farm come 2018 or 2020. On that basis, the ICBF expects an increasing number of herd-owners will be looking to buy a bull that is eligible on the replacement index requirement (ie 4 or 5 stars), as these bulls have greater potential to return more 4- or 5-star female offspring into the herd.



Niall's current stock bull, Icare, is the perfect example of a high Replacement Index bull. He has an index of €171 (5 stars within and across breed). He has a milk figure of +8 kgs (4 stars) and a calving interval figure of -3 days (5 stars). Niall also bred Highfield Odran SA2153 (inset) which is the highest index bull on the Gene Ireland young AI bull panel this Autumn. Straws are available through ICBF at 1850 600 900.

Q&A

Q. How do I check the Euro-Star Index of a bull before I purchase him?

The indexes for all pedigree registered bulls are available through the online bull search at www.icbf.com. You can search for a bull by name or tag number. Most pedigree bull sales provide catalogues with the Euro-Star Indices included. These are usually available online prior to the sale date and on the day of the sale.

Q. Should I look at within or across breed stars? If you are a pedigree breeder or a commercial farmer who only works with one breed, the within breed stars are the most applicable. If you have no allegiance to a particular breed then you should focus on the across breed stars. If you are looking to breed commercial 4 and 5 star Replacement Index heifers then you must look at the bulls across breed star rating on the Replacement Index. Bulls in certain breeds may be 5 stars within breed, but when compared with bulls across all of the beef breeds, they may only be a 1 star across breed.

FARMER FOCUS: NIALL O'CONNELL

'It suits the type of cattle that I am breeding'

Name: Niall O'Connell, Macroom, Co Cork.

Farming system: Pedigree Salers breeder.

BDGP Cow Reference No: 15

4 and 5 Star females: Cows 14; heifers 20

Stock bull or AI: Stock bull and AI.

Replacement strategy: Breed all of my own.

Why did you join the BDGP? The Salers breed is very strong on the Replacement Index and it made total sense for me to join as it suits the type of cattle that I am breeding. The scheme should also increase demand for high Replacement Index bulls. The financial supports are significant and even though money was not my motivation for joining, it is a nice bonus.

Do you feel it will deliver for the national suckler herd? It definitely will improve the national herd by increasing maternal genetics and leaving more cows with milk, fertility and calving ability. I feel this will make things much easier for farmers by increasing profits through higher performance and decreasing labour through fewer calving problems and better fertility.

What replacement strategy do you plan to implement in light of the scheme? I'll continue to breed my own using a combination of the top AI bulls and my own stock bull. I have found that the replacements I am keeping are generally the higher indexed heifers anyway.

Do you use the Euro-Star indices when selecting AI or stock bulls? My current stock bull, Icare, is a French-bred bull. I was able to check his index on the ICBF bull search prior to purchasing him. He is a very balanced bull and this is reflected in his index. He has a high Replacement and Terminal Index. On AI bulls, I would always check their indices before using



Niall O'Connell.

semen. It's good to have this independent information available.

Do you know much about genomics? I don't, to be totally honest. I know that it's based around collecting more information on an animal's genetics through their DNA. This should provide a bit of reassurance to a breeder like me prior to selling stock bulls or selecting AI or stock bulls for my own herd.

DATES FOR THE DIARY

22 Oct: Teagasc/Munster AI Suckler Event, Skibbereen Mart at 7.30pm.

28 Oct: Suckler Information Event, Ennis Mart at 7.30pm.

29 Oct: Teagasc/Munster AI Suckler Event, Castleisland Mart at 7.30pm.

12 Oct to 5 Nov: DAFM, ICBF, Teagasc BDGP Nationwide Information meetings. (One to one sessions: 5pm – 8pm)

▶ 22 Oct – Landmark Hotel, Carrick-on-Shannon

▶ 27 Oct – Ballykisteen Hotel, Limerick Junction

▶ 28 Oct – Kilmore Hotel, Cavan

▶ 29 Oct – Radisson Blue Hotel, Letterkenny

▶ 3 Nov – Treacy's West County Hotel, Ennis

▶ 4 Nov – Mullingar Park Hotel, Mullingar

▶ 5 Nov – Seven Oaks Hotel, Carlow

All meetings commence at 8pm