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 Odron 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.