DECEMBER 2025 | ISSUE #79

ASHEEP & BEEF Quarterly

Case study: Reducing bull breakdown

ASHEEP & BEEF interviews Simon Fowler, Chilwell Farms

Simon Fowler (Chilwell Farms) is the lead producer of ASHEEP & BEEF's 'Preventing Bull Preputial Breakdown by Vaccination' – a Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) project funded by Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) and facilitated by Dr Enoch Bergman (Swans Veterinary Services). As the PDS closes out its final year, ASHEEP & BEEF caught up with Simon to learn about the project's impact at Chilwell. Our thanks to Simon for his time giving the following interview.

Project background

The PDS has run over three years (2023 – 2025) and aimed to:

- demonstrate that a commercial Bovine Herpesvirus vaccine (either Rhinogard or Bovilis MH + IBR) prior to mating can reduce the incidence and severity of Bovine Balanoposthitis and hence bull wastage in virgin British bred bulls
- establish a baseline incidence of the syndrome and produce statistics useful to estimate both the cost of the syndrome to Esperance producers and the return on investment of vaccination.

Enoch has recently collated the final season of data and has been interviewing producers in the Esperance region about the 2025 breeding season. Results are again showing a reduction in the incidence of preputial breakdown in bulls vaccinated on individual farms. Final results, including cost benefit analysis, will be published in early 2026.

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Image: Cattle yarded at Chilwell. Image credit David Riggs (Riggs Australia).

Highlights

What is Bovine Balanoposthitis?

Infectious Balanoposthitis (IBP) is a condition caused by a herpesvirus in cattle. It leads to ulcerative inflammation of the penis and prepuce of bulls and of the vulva of cows. Like all herpesviruses, infection is permanent, often becoming dormant and may later reactivate when animals are under stress. Virgin bulls can become infected during the joining process when working with other older bulls or merely by being in contact with infected cows. (Find out more about the condition via the guide on page 4).

Chilwell Farms overview

Chilwell Farms is owned and managed by Simon and Robyn Fowler, and Andrew and Marie Fowler.

"Andrew runs the cropping enterprises, and I run the livestock operation with seven fulltime stock team members," said Simon. "Livestock form an important part of our mixed farming operation and we focus on the synergies between livestock and cropping to improve the whole farm profitability."

"We use Angus bulls purchased mainly from Ken MacLeay's Blackrock Angus Stud in Vasse and also purchase a few local bulls from Andrew Kuss's Allegria Park Stud. They are both very good people to deal with and their stock's genetics are well suited to the grass finishing program that we have for our steers."

Farm Snapshot

Farm name: Chilwell Farms

Farm area: Condingup, 50,000ha, mix of owned and leased

Enterprise mix: 38,000 ha cropping (canola/wheat/barley), 12,000 ha pasture

Average annual rainfall: 600mm (coast) to 350 (north)

Annual rainfall to date 2025: 500mm

Typical rotation: Pasture/canola/wheat

Soil: Largely duplex sand over clays with some heavy clay on the coast

Sheep: 28,000 Merino ewes, 2000 UltraWhite ewes

Cattle: 2000 Angus cows

Bulls: 80

"Generally, we purchase about 25 bulls each year and the new bulls are initially used to back up our fixed time AI [artificial insemination] program on 500 heifers. They are then used in the cow herd to replace any injured bulls or improve the joining ratios."

Bull breakdown experiences prior to vaccinating

"Before we started our bull vaccination program, virgin bull breakdown was a large issue. We were seeing up to 50% of our first-year bulls suffering penile breakdown within the first three weeks of joining. This was having a large financial impact to both the cost of the bull and the cost of lower pregnancy rates in the cows. It was also a large disincentive to spend money on superior bull genetics as the risk of breakdown was too high.

"The other factor influencing our bull herd was losing large amounts of bulls to corkscrewing penises when we jump tested them. This has dramatically reduced since we started vaccinating from as many as 15 bulls out of 80, to about 4 bulls.

"Previously, we thought that preputial breakdown was caused by physical damage from fighting and accidents. We are now very confident that a large amount of the issues are caused by the bulls contracting bovine herpesvirus whilst working. Testing during the PDS has shown that the few bulls that do breakdown are positive."

Above left: Dr Enoch Bergman vaccinating a bull. Right: Two bulls that were identified with preputial damage this season.

Above: Close ups of the preputial damage of the bulls on the previous page.

Vaccination program

"Vaccination is only done on bulls before their first joining, as we rarely see any preputial breakdown after the first year. Current available vaccinations are Rhinogard or Bovilis MH + IBR. We have used both vaccines in the past and don't have a preference as they both seem effective."

"We include the vaccination with our standard pre-joining protocols, so it is easy to manage."

Vaccination results

"Since starting vaccinating, we have seen a large reduction in penile breakdown in young bulls and corkscrewing in older bulls. We are still getting a small number of penile breakdowns but no big disasters like in previous years.

"Now that we are aware of the issue, we remove any bulls showing signs of injury or swelling from the joining process to allow them to recover. This year, two bulls out of the four impacted seem to have recovered fully."

Why was running a PDS on the issue important?

"I think this PDS project was important to run because it gave us the opportunity to gather important information and put some science behind what we thought was happening in the field. We have now proved that vaccination for bovine herpesvirus does reduce the amount of preputial breakdown in virgin bulls, this gives local producers the knowledge they need to develop the best pre-joining protocols for their bull herd and the confidence to invest in better bull genetics.

"Through this PDS I have learned that the bulls that are showing early signs of penile damage can be saved if they are removed from joining and allowed to recover. This has a far better animal welfare outcome for the bull and a better financial outcome for the enterprise.

"MLA's PDS program is a great tool for grower groups to gather information and share best practice. Practical on-farm demonstrations and trials are always the best way for farmers to learn and share information. I personally enjoy being involved in PDS sites and get great value from seeing how other enterprises manage the issues that we all face."

Simon's top 3 tips for producers considering vaccination to prevent bull preputial breakdown:

1. *Vaccinate all virgin bulls at the correct time.*
2. *Monitor joining and remove bulls showing damage.*
3. *Jump test bulls yearly to ensure that mild infections haven't led to permanent damage.*

Above: Simon Fowler with veterinarians Reuben Welke and Enoch Bergman. Thanks to David Riggs for the images in this article.

Producer guide: Infectious balanoposthitis of bulls

Dr Enoch Bergman, Swans Veterinary Services

Infectious Balanoposthitis (IBP) is a condition caused by a herpesvirus in cattle. It leads to ulcerative inflammation of the penis and prepuce of bulls and of the vulva of cows. Like all herpesviruses, infection is permanent, often becoming dormant and may later reactivate when animals are under stress. Virgin bulls can become infected during the joining process when working with other older bulls or merely by being in contact with infected cows.

Figure 1: Bull penis with severe case of IBP.

The 2023-2025 ASHEEP & BEEF delivered Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) project "Preventing Bull Preputial Breakdown by Vaccination", in the Esperance region of WA, funded by Meat & Livestock Australia and facilitated by Swans Veterinary Services, demonstrated the value of vaccinating virgin bulls with commercial vaccines to reduce the incidence and severity of bovine herpesvirus infections.

The results of the PDS strongly support the use of either of two commercially available herpesvirus vaccines to reduce premature bull breakdown (meaning early loss of breeding ability in bulls due to severe preputial damage) associated with balanoposthitis in virgin bulls. While multiple factors likely impact the syndrome, including infectious, environmental and genetic contributors, many cases may be initiated by herpesvirus infection, leading to secondary infection, and further damage to the bull's prepuce. Sometimes, severe swelling can prevent the bull from retracting his penis, causing further injury.

Figure 2: Rhinogard.

There are 3 keys to managing IBP successfully

1. Vaccination of virgin bulls before joining
2. Vigilant monitoring for early signs during joining
3. Prompt treatment and enforced sexual rest

Vaccination

The targeted vaccination of virgin bulls can be achieved using one or both of the following commercially available vaccines, either Rhinogard or Bovilis MH + IBR.

Rhinogard [*Figure 2*], produced by Zoetis, is a modified live vaccination administered intranasally requiring a single dose. The vaccine is available in either 50 or 10 dose packets which are reconstituted with either 100 or 20 mls of saline respectively. Administer 2 ml intranasally using the Zoetis-designed applicator.

Figure 3: Bovilis MH + IBR.

Bovilis MH + IBR developed by Coopers [*Figure 3*], is a killed vaccine requiring two 2 ml doses to be delivered subcutaneously at least one month apart. It is available in 100 ml and 250 ml packs. No reconstitution of the vaccine is required.

Swans Veterinary Services recommends that studs vaccinate their sale bulls prior to sale, but also recommends that producers provide boosters to bulls purchased from studs already vaccinated. Producers should administer whichever vaccine they choose three to one weeks prior to joining.

Early Recognition

IBP often progresses rapidly, and can have catastrophic consequences. By remaining vigilant through joining, producers can remove affected bulls promptly, improving the chances for recovery for subsequent seasons.

Treatment and Sexual Rest

Sexual rest is critical for improving the likelihood of adequate recovery. Broad-spectrum antibiotics and anti-inflammatories can further improve outcomes. Once infection and inflammation have subsided, your bull may need veterinary assessment to see if he will be able to function adequately next season. Using an Electroejaculator (a device used to assess reproductive function), a veterinarian can evaluate whether a bull is capable of achieving an erection and likely to still be able to serve a cow. In some more severe cases, surgical repair (via circumcision) may be necessary in order to restore service capability in subsequent seasons. In some severe cases, where return to service is unlikely, affected bulls unfit for transport may require veterinary treatment including surgery for salvage.