Consider Condition

Body condition determines readiness to rebreed, beef producers told at MU Thompson Farm workshop.

Story & photo by ***Duane Dailey***

Fall is the time to start getting cows in body condition for rebreeding next spring, Extension specialists said at a cow-feeding workshop at the University of Missouri (MU) Thompson Farm, Spickard, Mo. Thin cows, with body condition scores (BCSs) of only 3 or 4 on a 9-point scale, are less likely to be ready to rebreed, workshop participants were told.

Cows should be on a schedule to have a calf and to rebreed every 12 months. "A cow has only 85 days to calve, start cycling and be rebred to stay on a 365-day schedule," said David Patterson, MU beef reproduction specialist.

BCS is one of the biggest factors in whether that will happen, echoed every speaker at the workshop.

As a rule of thumb, 80-100 pounds (lb.) of body weight is needed to increase a cow by one BCS, depending on the cow's frame. Cows should score 5 or 6 at breeding time.

To illustrate the condition problem, workshop participants evaluated first-calf heifers from the Thompson Farm herd. The heifers had worked hard all summer, producing milk to wean big calves in September. While raising their first calves, they were still in a growing stage themselves, the specialists pointed out. Some heifers, all of which were carrying their second calves, were going to have to gain up to 200 lb. by calving time, Jan. 15 to Feb. 15.

"We expect an awful lot from heifers getting ready for their second calves," Patterson said. To add needed weight it is important to start early. It's easier to put on weight in the fall, instead of waiting until late winter.

To ease the weight gain, calves would be weaned in early fall so the cows could start their recovery, Patterson said. "A lactating cow puts most of her energy into producing milk for her calf."

K.C. Olson, MU Extension nutritionist, said weight gains prior to calving are less expensive than gains after the calf has been born and the cow begins to lactate. After fall weaning, a cow can quickly pick up 80-100 lb. on good fall pasture. Additional weight still must be gained to have the cows ready for breeding.

There's a window of two or three months to get the cows in condition, Patterson said.

"Don't wait until two weeks before calving to realize the cows are too thin," advised Gene Schmitz, regional livestock specialist, Princeton, Mo. "That doesn't give you enough time to put on needed weight."

Schmitz said individual cows grazing stockpiled fescue in the fall at Thompson Farm have gained up to 4 lb./day. Average gains for the herd for November and December have been nearer to 2 lb./day.

Olson, a nutritionist with the Extension Commercial Agriculture program, led the participants through a worksheet on how to calculate the amount of feed needed to meet weight requirements for different body condition scores.

The formula takes the estimated amount of weight gain needed, then divides it by the number of days before calving. That gives the average daily gain (ADG) needed. Olson outlined steps to figure a ration needed for that gain.

"You don't need a computer to do this," Olson said. "You don't need to call a Ph.D. on the phone. You can do this work with a calculator and a tablet.

"As a nutritionist, I like to think of the least expensive way to put on those pounds," Olson said. "It's best to have the hay tested, so you know the starting nutritional value. But if you don't do that, call your regional livestock specialist and get the numbers off of feeding tables."

Editor's Note: *Duane Dailey is senior writer for the Extension & Ag Information department at the University of Missouri, which provided this article.*

►**Above: Cows should be scored at the time they are pregnancy-checked this fall, recommended Gene Schmitz, regional livestock specialist, Princeton, Mo. "If it looks like you would be hurt on the sharp bones if you bumped into her, she's probably a No. 3. If you can just see a bit of backbone and the three last ribs, she's probably a No. 5."**