



Ridin' Herd

► by Rick Rasby, University of Nebraska

Condition score cows at weaning

For spring-calving cows, body condition at calving affects the calf at calving time and cow reproductive performance during the breeding season. Overconditioning cows, especially if the extra condition is fed on, is wasting money. Underconditioning cows, especially young females, is risky because their performance can be inconsistent. A properly conditioned cow herd at the right time during the production cycle is the goal. The importance of this management practice cannot be overlooked this year as input costs, especially feed costs, continue to increase.

Scoring system

There are six areas on the animal that provide visual access to determine the amount of condition (fat) a cow has in order to assign a body condition score (BCS). These six areas are the brisket, ribs, back, hooks (hip area), pins and tailhead area. For examples and descriptions of cows of various BCS, you can refer to the pictures provided from www.cowbcs.info, the *Angus Journal's* website devoted to the topic.

Visually picture in your mind that a cow

with a BCS of 3 will have no fat in the brisket, over the ribs and back, or in the hooks, pins and tailhead area. A BCS 3 cow will have a crease in her hindquarter. This crease actually indicates she has had to mobilize muscle tissue to meet maintenance energy needs. The BCS 3 cow, as she is viewed from the rear, appears pointed because her spinous process, hip and pin bones are easily seen.

Contrast this in your mind with a BCS 5 cow. A BCS 5 cow will have a more smooth appearance because she has fat in the areas

described previously for the BCS 3 cow that is devoid of condition. The foreribs can't be seen in a BCS 5 cow, but the 12th and 13th ribs can be seen.

Now, contrast this with a cow with a BCS of 6. A BCS 6 cow will have fat in the brisket, and the 12th or 13th ribs can't be seen. There will be two small ponds of fat on either side of the tailhead. Sometimes, inexperienced condition scorers will catch cows in the chute and hand-palpate them to train the touch to a visual image.

We developed a mobile application for producers to learn and record body condition of their cow herd. The BCS mobile app has three components:

- 1) access to a written document that describes the 9-point system and the application of BCS information to develop management strategies;
- 2) a "learn" component that allows the user to practice condition-scoring a set of cows in the system; and
- 3) a component to allow the user to take pictures of cows in their herd, score each cow, and store this information. Cows can be scored multiple times throughout the production cycle.

The app, NUBeef-BCS, may be purchased and downloaded from Google Play and the Apple App iStore.

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BCS 3 Cows such as this BCS 3 cow are thin in condition. Thin cows (BCS 1-4) will have an angular and bony appearance, with minimum fat cover over the spine, ribs, hook bones and pin bones. These cows exhibit no visible fat around the tailhead or brisket. Animals in this category are more susceptible to health problems and have lower pregnancy rates compared to cows with a BCS 5 or above. AJ digital readers can click on the photo above to view video of a BCS 3 cow moving. The video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjwvPRDSUW4.





BCS 4 This BCS 4 exhibits little fat in the brisket. There is a slight outline of the spine, some ribs are visible, and the hips and pin bones can be seen. It's typical for good-milking cows to reach this condition after weaning; however, producers should have cows back to a BCS 5-7 by calving. AJ digital readers can click on the photo above to view video of a BCS 4 cow moving. The video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mtRnY2ndMw.



BCS 5 BCS 5 cows, such as this cow, exhibit good overall appearance. The outline of the hips and pin bones are visible; however, there is some fat cover over the hooks and pins. Areas on each side of the tailhead are well-filled, but not mounded. The spine is no longer visible. This condition falls into the most desirable range, BCS 5-7. Cows in this group have fewer calving difficulties, increased pregnancy rates and fewer days to first estrus. AJ digital readers can click on the photo above to view video of a BCS 5 cow moving. The video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZ3HR3BadZs.

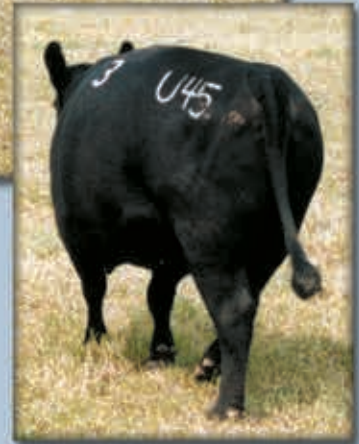


BCS 6 This BCS 6 cow exhibits good condition, with some fat in the brisket and flanks and an outline of hips and pin bones. The spine and ribs are no longer visible. The hindquarters are plump and full, and there is noticeable sponginess over the foreribs and on each side of the tailhead. AJ digital readers can click on the photo above to view video of a BCS 6 cow moving. The video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=offRl8SOeSI.



BCS 7 BCS 7 cows will show abundant fat cover around the tailhead and in the brisket, and the spine and ribs will no longer be visible. AJ digital readers can click on the photo above to view video of a BCS 7 cow moving. The video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEBwP_YDj3w.





BCS 8 Animals such as this BCS 8 cow are considered fat, or overconditioned. Bone structure disappears from sight, and fat cover is thick and spongy. BCS 8-9 cows will look boxy and smooth, with fat deposits around the tailhead and on the pin bones. These cows are more costly to maintain and are at a higher risk for dystocia, failure to cycle and failure to conceive. A) digital readers can click on the photo above to view video of a BCS 8 cow moving. The video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWaePLi23CY



BCS 9 This BCS 9 cow exhibits extreme amounts of fat in the brisket and flanks, and the tailhead is buried in fat. BCS 9 animals may have impaired mobility due to the excessive fat. A) digital readers can click on the photo above to view video of a BCS 9 cow moving. The video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnsP7ZQH8f0.

BCS targets

Body condition at calving influences how quickly cows will return to estrus and ready themselves for the next breeding season.

When a cow calves during the calving season influences weight at weaning, as well as future performance of the female and male offspring. Cows that calve during the first 21 days of the calving season over an eight- to nine-year period produce 1.5-2.0 more weaning weight equivalents during that time period compared to a cow that continues to calve the third 21-day calving period.

Heifer calves born to cows that calve in the first 21-day period have greater pregnancy rates during their first breeding and calve earlier in the calving season, which is a great start to being a productive part of the cow herd. In addition, male calves born early in the calving season when retained into the feedlot are heavier, and more grade Choice when finished compared to contemporaries born later in the calving season.

For spring-calving cows, manage cows to calve in a BCS 5. Manage first-calf heifers to calve in a BCS 6. The extra condition is warranted for the young females because they are still growing, lactating for the first time

and trying to get ready for their next pregnancy. Even if you do everything right with these females, their postpartum interval is at least 15 days longer compared to a mature cow.

If mature cows are always thin and need to be fed to get them back in condition before calving, check the genetics. Something doesn't match up with the feed resources or your management. Cow size and milk production are the biggest challenges from a nutritional standpoint.

Some producers have pushed their calving to start in late spring (May) and summer. For these herds, condition of cows at calving appears to be less important on future performance of the cows. These cows can have a BCS less than 5 at calving and still have good reproductive performance. This is likely because cows are grazing vegetative grass before (in some cases) and after calving. The caution would be not to calve these cows in thin body condition. Even for summer-calving herds, calving first-calvers in a BCS 6 is still recommended.

Condition scoring cows at weaning seems logical. Pay particular attention to young females weaning their first calf; they are the ones that are likely to be thin. Don't separate them off yet. Watch them to make sure they begin to regain condition after the nutrient demand for lactation has been removed.

Mature cows that are thin at weaning should bounce back in condition if they are thin at weaning by 60 days postweaning.

Condition score spring-calving cows about 90 days prior to calving. This is your last opportunity to get cows in the right condition before calving. Trying to add condition to cows after calving is like trying to push water uphill. The diet will need to be fairly dense in energy, and cows that get high-energy diets after calving tend to milk more and not put on condition.

Final thought

Body condition of your cow herd is a better indicator of your nutrition program as compared to body weight. Over- and underfeeding the beef herd is not cost-effective. High annual cow costs will continue to remind us to work diligently on balancing feed and reproduction in the cow enterprise. Pay particular attention to the condition of young females that have just weaned their first calf.



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