



Ridin' Herd

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Score them now

We have visited about this topic and its importance to cow performance a number of times. Body condition at calving, especially for spring-calving cows, not only affects how cows perform at calving, but also influences performance during the next breeding season.

Introduction

How cows perform during the breeding season affects profit potential in the cow-calf enterprise in regard to pregnancy rate and when in the breeding season they become pregnant. Cows that become pregnant early in the breeding season calve early in the calving season, and their calves are older and heavier at weaning.

Overconditioning cows, especially if the extra condition is fed on, is wasting money. Underconditioned cows are risky because their performance can be very inconsistent. Properly conditioned cows are the goal. It's like Goldilocks and the porridge being too hot, too cold or just right.

Condition scoring

Let's refresh our knowledge of the condition scoring system. The most common system used is the one-to-nine condition-scoring system. A body condition score (BCS) 1 cow is very thin and emaciated. A BCS 9 cow is very fat and obese. Very seldom do we see the extreme scores. Most cows are between a BCS 3 and a BCS 7.

There are six areas on the animal where we visually assess the amount of condition (fat):

- brisket,
- ribs,
- back,
- hooks (hip area),
- pins, and
- tailhead area.

A BCS 3 cow will have no fat in the brisket; over the ribs and back; or in the hooks, pins and tailhead area. In fact, she will have a crease in her hindquarter where she has had to start to mobilize muscle tissue to meet maintenance energy needs. The BCS 3 cow, as she is viewed from the rear, appears pointed because you can easily see her spinous process, hip and pin bones.

A BCS 5 cow will have a "smoother" appearance because

she has fat in the areas described previously. You cannot see the fore-ribs, but you can see the 12th and 13th ribs in a BCS 5 cow.

A BCS 6 cow will have fat in the brisket, you will not see the 12th or 13th ribs, and there will be two small ponds of fat on the sides of the tailhead.

Some inexperienced condition scorers will catch cows in the chute and hand-palpatate them to train the touch to a visual image. It is critical that when condition-scoring cows, the scorer evaluate condition and not muscle or hair. "Seeing" through the hair can be difficult in the winter.

Cow body condition is a much better gauge of your nutrition program than is cow weight.

When you observe cows daily, it is more difficult to detect changes in condition score. Many times, before you realize a change in condition, cows have actually lost more condition than you would like. Producers need to be disciplined to make sure they are not underestimating condition changes so that appropriate action can be taken.

If you would like to have new ranch hands learn about condition-scoring beef cows or brush up on this tool, go online to <http://beef.unl.edu/learningmodules.shtml> and go through the learning module on condition scoring.

Target scores

For spring-calving cows, manage cows to calve in a BCS 5. For first-calf heifers, manage them 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.

Cows will gain and lose condition throughout the year. If they are doing a good job of raising their calf, they will likely be thin at weaning. In drought conditions, cows raising a calf will be thin. In most conditions, thin cows should bounce back in condition 45-60 days after weaning.

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. Cow size and milk production are the biggest challenges from a nutrition standpoint. Maybe one or both of these characteristics don't match your feed resources.

When to score

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. These are what I term "elastic" cows; they are thin at weaning but then, like a rubber band when stretched and the stress relieved, return to an acceptable condition once the calf is weaned.

Condition-score spring-calving cows again 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 calves seem to get milk scours.

If you need to feed thin cows prior to calving to get them back into condition, there is a table in the National Research

Council (NRDC) 1996 *Nutrient Requirements for Beef Cattle* that, based on cow weight and condition score, has the energy required to move a cow from a lower BCS to the next highest BCS.

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For more information visit:

<http://beef.unl.edu/learningmodules.shtml>

www.cowbcs.info

In the learning module mentioned previously, there is another learning module titled "Using Body Condition Score to Manage the Nutrition Program." You can learn how to use the 1996 NRC table and there is an example of designing a diet.

Final thought

Over- and underfeeding the beef herd is not cost-effective. Body condition at calving influences the quality of the colostrum and the ability of the calf to fight off the early calf

diseases. In addition, for spring-calving cows, body condition at calving affects the length of the postpartum interval and the percentage of cows cycling early in the breeding season.

Pay particular attention to the condition of young females that have just weaned their first calf. These females will be the ones in a cow herd that will be most challenged.

If cows are constantly thin, check the genetics. Maybe this package doesn't fit the feed resources that you have. Grazing cows to

the proper condition is much more cost-effective than carrying feed to them.



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Editor's Note: "Ridin' Herd" is a monthly column written by Rick Rasby, professor of animal science at the University of Nebraska. The column focuses on beef nutrition and its effects on performance and profitability.