Ridin' Herd

► by **Rick Rasby,** *beef specialist, University of Nebraska*

Assess condition at weaning

Calf prices this fall will likely be the highest ever recorded. Corn price continues to trend downward, pushing calf prices up. Input costs continue to increase. Even with good prices for weaned calves, producers need to continue to implement sound management strategies to be low-cost producers.

Feed for proper condition

Body condition of spring-calving cows at the time of calving has an impact on herd productivity. For spring-calving cows, body condition at calving impacts the calf at calving time. In addition, for spring-calving cows, body condition at calving impacts performance during the next breeding season.

Overconditioning cows, especially if the extra condition was fed on using harvested feeds, is wasting money. Underconditioned cows are 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 forage costs, continue to be high.

BCS system

There are six areas on the animal where a person can visually assess the amount of condition (fat) an animal has in order to assign a body condition score (BCS). These six areas are the brisket, ribs, back, hooks (hip area), pins and tailhead.

Visually picture in your mind a BCS 3 cow 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 (fat). The foreribs cannot be seen in a BCS 5 cow, but the 12th and 13th ribs can be seen.

Now contrast this with a BCS 6 cow, which will have fat in the brisket. You will not be able to see the 12th or 13th ribs, and there will be two small mounds 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. It is critical when condition-scoring cows that the scorer is evaluating condition and not muscle or hair. Cows with a thick hair coat, like in the winter, or that are heavy-muscled can be more difficult to condition-score. Putting them through the chute and palpating them will give the scorer confidence when scoring these cows.

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Use the information

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 learn more about condition-scoring beef cows or you have new employees and want them to learn about condition-scoring beef cows, go to *http://beef.unl.edu/learningmodules.shtml* and go through the learning module on condition-scoring.

There also are a couple of mobile apps producers can download onto their mobile devices. The University of Nebraska has one. It has a "learn" component that includes pictures of cows that the user can use to learn to body condition score before scoring their own herd. In the "learn" component, the user can compare their score of a cow to the score given by a person who has experience in condition-scoring beef cows.

BCS target

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 than that of 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, because as they increase, pounds of feed and energy needs also increase.

For late spring (May)- and summer-calving herds, condition of cows at calving appears to be less important on future performance of the cows. These cows can have a condition score of 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 BCS 6 is still recommended.

When to condition-score cows

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

Condition-score spring-calving cows again about 90 days prior to calving as this

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is the last opportunity to get cows in the right condition before calving. Be proactive if spring-calving cows are thin at this time. Trying to add condition to cows after calving is like trying to push water uphill and is usually expensive. The diet will need to be fairly dense in energy, and cows that get high-energy diets after calving tend to produce more milk and not put on condition.

Final thought

Over- and underfeeding the beef herd is not cost-effective. Even in good economic times, implement management strategies that result in opportunities to increase profit potential of the cow enterprise. Body condition at calving impacts 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.

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