



# Ridin' Herd

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

## Condition-score cows now

*Managing body condition of your cow herd is important and is a critical management tool that affects reproductive performance and implementation of a herd nutrition program. Body condition at calving, for spring-calving cows, affects reproductive performance during the next breeding season. Cows and first-calf females in good body condition at calving [body condition score (BCS) 5 for cows and BCS 6 for first-calvers] will resume estrous cycles and breed early in the breeding season. How cows are managed late in the grazing season and prior to calving will have a major effect on body condition as they enter the winter prior to calving.*

### Scoring system

There are six areas on the animal that are visually accessible to help assess the amount of condition (fat) an animal has. These six areas are the brisket, ribs, back, hooks (hip area), pins and tailhead area. Picture in your mind that 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 hind quarter. This crease actually indicates she has had to mobilize muscle tissue to meet maintenance energy needs. As she is viewed from the rear, the BCS 3 cow 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 smoother appearance because she has fat in the areas described previously for the BCS 3 cow that

is devoid of condition (fat). The fore ribs 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. She will have fat in the brisket, and the 12th and 13th ribs cannot be seen. 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-palpatate 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 heavily muscled, are difficult to score. Putting them through the chute and palpating them will give the scorer confidence when scoring these cows.

### When to 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 by 60 days postweaning. These are what many will term "elastic" cows; they are thin at weaning, but, 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 is the last opportunity to get cows in the right condition before calving. Be proactive if spring-calving cows are thin at this time.

### Time of weaning and cow condition

A production activity that has a major "drag" on how nutrients are partitioned in the beef cow is lactation. Cows have a nutrient need for lactation, and until the diet meets and then exceeds that requirement, nutrients will not be partitioned to other activities, such as replenishing body energy reserves.

The balance between nutrient (feed) resources available to the cow and level of milk production is critical. Too much milk output matched with medium- to low-quality feed resources results in a cow herd that is constantly trying to play catch-up with regard to body condition.

When feed resources of the ranch unit and milk production potential for the cow herd are matched in an ideal production system, the cows will be a little thin at weaning time, but once the calves are weaned and that nutrient demand for lactation is removed, the cows will begin to gain back body condition within about 45 days postweaning.

In addition, in this "ideal" production system, cows would be in BCS 5 going into the winter without any — or at least minimal — supplementation. However, if weaning occurs late in the grazing season for spring-calving cows, and the grass resource quality and quantity are decreasing rapidly, then gaining back body condition will be a

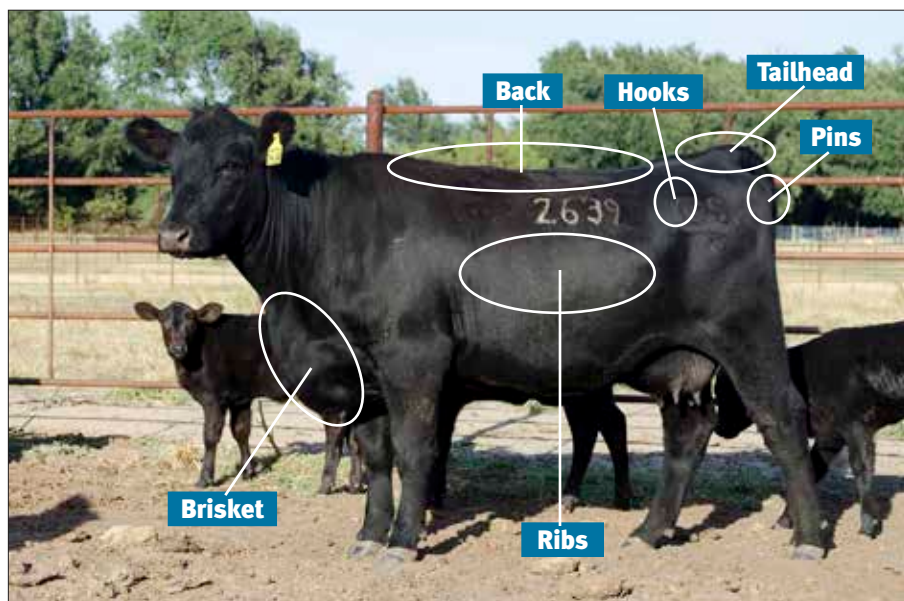


PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

For more information visit [www.cowbcs.info](http://www.cowbcs.info).

challenge without some supplementation or maybe a full-feed of harvested forages.

The challenge for spring-calving first-calf cows that are weaning their first calf is managing body condition of this group without a lot of feed inputs. These females are the ones that are most likely to be thin in the fall at weaning.

Body condition is critical for this group of females, and it impacts their stayability in the cow herd. Because this group of females has not reached maturity, their rumens are smaller compared to mature cows, which means the quality of the diet must be higher to meet their nutrient needs. This is the major reason why quality of the diet for young beef females is so important.

Warm-season pasture quality decreases as the season changes from summer to fall. From a young-cow management perspective,

this is a critical time of the year to manage condition.

### **Final comments**

Body condition is an important management tool. Body condition is a better indicator of the nutrition program than is cow weight. Instead of exact body condition scores (for example, is this cow a BCS 3 or 4, or is she a BCS 5 or 6), it may be simplest for producers to be able to identify cows that are fat (BCS 7 and 8), cows that are in ideal body condition (BCS 5 and 6) as they enter the winter, and cows that are thin (BCS 3 and 4) and make plans for how thin cows will be managed nutritionally.

The cows in ideal and fat condition can be managed as a group.

Managing young females in a beef production system is a challenge. If you have

been diligent in your breeding program and selected genetics that fit your feed resources, then paying close attention to young-cow management to provide them an opportunity to be a productive part of the herd as mature cows is not providing a false feed environment. The challenge with the young female from a nutritional perspective is the small rumen capacity and the quality of the feed resource available at certain times of the year.



**EMAIL:** rrasby@unlnotes.unl.edu

**Editor's Note:** Rick Rasby is a beef specialist with the University of Nebraska.