



Ridin' Herd

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Condition cows early

Body condition score (BCS) describes the relative fatness of a cow through the use of a nine-point scale and is an effective management tool to evaluate nutritional status of the herd. The BCS system allows producers to visually assess their cow herd using a number system that objectively describes the amount of condition or fat reserve of an animal. Because cow-calf producers do not weigh cows on a regular basis, they need a management technique to evaluate their cow herd as it relates to productivity and profit potential.

Managing body condition

Cow BCS is closely related to reproductive efficiency and is a more reliable indicator of nutritional status of a cow than body weight. Body condition at calving affects future reproductive performance for spring-calving cows. Grazing lost body condition back onto cows is more economical than carrying harvested forage to them to achieve the desired body condition.

Managing body condition is like making the porridge for Goldilocks: not too hot, not too cold, but just right. It's not economical to have cows too fat or too thin; they need to be just right at the right time of the production cycle.

When to condition score

As a rule of thumb, one BCS equates to about 75-80 pounds (lb.) of live weight in cows. Thus, if a cow weighed 1,100 lb. at BCS 4, this same cow would be expected to weigh 1,175 lb. at BCS 5 and 1,250 lb. at BCS 6.

It is important to remember that these weight changes do not include weight of the fetus, fetal membranes or fetal fluids, which, in total, amount to about 125-155 lb. for cows in late gestation. With this concept in mind, remember a cow that is maintaining weight during late gestation is actually losing body weight and, possibly, body condition because the fetus is growing at least 1 lb. per day.

The most commonly used condition-scoring system is the 1-to-9 BCS system, where a BCS 1 cow is extremely thin and emaciated and a BCS 9 cow is very fat and obese [a visual representation (photos and video) of the scoring system is available at www.cowbcs.info]. Assign a cow a condition score in whole numbers such as 3, 4, 5, etc.

The greatest single factor influencing rebreeding performance of beef cows is body condition at calving, especially for spring-

calving herds. However, if producers wait until calving to manage body condition of their cow herd, they will find it very difficult and expensive to increase the body condition of a lactating cow.

Although evaluation of body condition can be looked at as an ongoing process, there are key times when body condition scoring should be considered in the late summer/early fall of the year especially for ranchers who are trying to graze cows for 12 months.

Consider condition-scoring the cow herd in late summer. This may seem odd, but it does allow for strategic use of management practices that can economically put condition back on thin females. Condition-scoring the cow herd at this time may be used in planning management strategies such as early weaning or supplementation programs for cows grazing warm-season pastures or range that is decreasing in quality. Scoring cows at this time is probably more important in range areas as compared to areas that would have both cool- and warm-season pastures and crop residues.

Young cows need to be examined closely, as they are likely to be the females that are losing condition, and weaning calves from this group early may be the best management option. Also, if pasture quality and quantity is decreasing at a rapid rate due to environmental conditions, weaning the whole calf crop may be necessary. Data indicate that it is more economical to feed the calf directly than to supplement the cow to feed the calf.

Condition-scoring cows in the range area in the fall is critical. Because of the feed resources, it is more difficult to get condition back on cows prior to calving in the range area where the feed resources are primarily warm-season grasses. Condition-scoring cows at this time will help in planning an economical winter supplementation program to get females back to the target BCS. If young

females are thin, consider early weaning their calves to allow them to regain condition. For producers who have cool-season pastures and crop residues, late summer/early fall condition score may not be as critical. However, it may be important in dry years. Then, early weaning or supplementation may be management options.

Time of calving, weaning

The choice of calving season in relation to peak forage production for a given location is critical to the cost of maintaining adequate body condition on mature cows. Calving before forage production leads to the use of more harvested forage and drives up total feed costs. Calving about two weeks ahead of available grass or up to four weeks after first grass growth would substantially reduce harvested feed to cows and also reduces labor at calving and early calthood health problems.

Such a system results in lighter calves at weaning and optimizes profit typically only when ownership of calves is retained. The advantage of a late-spring or early-summer calving program is to force the cow to graze for most, if not all, of her nutrient needs and avoid harvested forage being fed to the cow.

A Nebraska study conducted in the Sandhills indicates March-calving cows were fed 3,182 lb. of hay per year while June-calving cows were fed 30 lb. of hay per year. June-calving cows were fed more protein supplement compared to March-calving cows to maintain body condition. This is just an example. You will need to adjust this concept for your location and resources.

Final thoughts

Take time to record BCS now, well before calving and with particular attention to the age groups of your cows. Plan a sound nutritional program with an eye toward optimizing profit and reducing feed costs. Keep an open mind for ideas such as early weaning or calving season adjustments, but ask questions and get documentation before implementing. Body condition scores are simply a tool that may help you or your customer do a better job of producing beef. It can also be used as a risk management tool in beef production systems.

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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.