
Cow Body Condition Scoring

Hay prices are making an old tool more important than ever this winter. Hay prices are 50% higher than they were last year. So we need to focus attention on feeding enough for good health, but not over feeding fat animals. Cow Body Condition Scoring has been around for a long time, but needs renewed attention at current feed prices.

Cow body condition scoring separates cows into three large groups and three subgroups. Cows are first rated as thin (score 1-3), moderate (score 4-6), and fleshy (score 7-9). Body condition scoring needs to be recorded and linked to herd feeding and productivity. You have to look through the hair coat and evaluate key condition indication points on the animal. These would include the pin bone, tail head, hip bone, back, ribs, brisket. The body condition score relates directly to animal weight and body fat. Each point of a body condition score equates to 75 pounds of body weight and 4 percent body fat. So if you have thin cows with a body condition score of 3 and you want them at a body condition score of 6 going into the coldest month, then you are in need of 225 pounds of weight and 12 percent added body fat. This would be a challenge and a significant expense at this time of year.

You can find Cow Body Condition Scoring Charts on the Web or come to the Extension Office in Beatrice for your very own laminated all weather free copy. Key times to body condition score are at weaning time, 45 days after weaning, and 90 days ahead of calving. Those times fit a lot of our area producers this time of year. Pay particular attention to young cows. The biggest culling loss is in two to three-year-old cows which get thin and can't catch up when fed with the mature cows. Many times it is better to pen them with first calf heifers for feeding purposes.

The greatest single factor influencing rebreeding performance of beef cows is body condition at calving. As you can see from the example above cows that are out of condition may have a real challenge to catch up. So it is better to have an ongoing condition scoring plan. It may be a great time to team up with a nearby producer to score cows together. I know when I look in the mirror, I have a hard time seeing my condition score, or admitting it! When we see the cattle every day, it can create the same challenge. Scoring a friend's herd and having him score yours in return, gives a fresh and less personal view. No! No! I am not inviting you to share my score with me. We are talking cattle here. Stay on message!

Thin cows also produce significantly less colostrum. Calves from thin cows are less vigorous and more susceptible to calf-hood disease challenges. Nobody wants extra chores to do, but it may pay huge dividends in live, healthy and growing calves and strong healthy cows which stay in the herd to produce offspring.

Evaluating forage quality in the late fall and early winter when the feeding season starts fits together with body condition scoring. It will help to know how much supplemental feed at what cost needs to be added to maintain body condition. We can use the poorer feeds in December and January because body condition allows some weight loss on the cows and poorer feeds generate more waste heat during digestion. This time of year that waste heat is important to the cow's comfort.

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