

## **Using Body Condition Scoring as a Management Tool**

Body condition scores when used on a consistent and regular basis can be an effective tool to monitor the effectiveness of your beef cow nutrition program as environmental conditions and nutrient needs change. Body condition is closely related to reproductive performance.

Fall or at weaning time is an important time to body condition score your spring calving cows. Pay particular attention to young females weaning their first calf. They are the ones that are the most likely to be thin. Watch them to make sure that they begin to regain condition after the nutrient demand for lactation has been removed. First calf heifers should regain a body condition score of 6 on a scale of 9 prior to calving again. A body condition score 6 cow or heifer should have no visible ribs or backbone showing.

Mature cows that are thin at weaning may bounce back in condition at 60 days postweaning. These cows should return to a condition score of 5 once the calf is removed. A score of 5 is thinner than a 6 so you will be able to see a bit of rib in the last pair or two. Mature cows should be at a score of 5 at calving.

To make body condition score a true management tool it should be used more than just at weaning time. Work in body scoring cows when you are doing other cow related jobs. There are several key times when body condition scoring should be considered and recorded:

### **45 Days after Weaning**

This will give you a good idea how fast cows are “bouncing back” after weaning. Thin cows should be gaining back if cow type is matched with feed resources.

### **90 Days before Calving**

This is the last opportunity to get condition back on cows economically. This would be the time to separate thin cows from cows in good condition. This would be when you would place the thin cows/heifers on a higher nutritional diet to help them gain back condition.

### **Calving Time**

If you have thin cows at calving you may want to change your pre-calving feeding program for next year. Because of the nutritional demands of lactation, it is difficult and very expensive to try and get cows to increase in body condition. Thin cows at calving will produce less milk and poorer quality milk, less vigorous calves and will be slower to rebreed.

### **Beginning of Breeding Season**

Thin cows at breeding may indicate a poor match of calving season to feed sources. Was your hay of lower quality than you thought? Did all the cows have equal access to feed? Were your

thin cows heavy milkers? First calf heifers? Three year old cows? Cows that are thin at calving will be slower to rebreed and will become late calvers. This will lower the reproductive efficiency of your cow herd.

Ideally, it would be good to keep a record of body condition score for each individual cow throughout the production year. However each operation has to adapt this tool to their situation. But keeping tally of your body condition score can be easy and low tech. Get a tablet, write BCS 3, 4, 5, 6 across the top, and draw lines down the paper to make columns. Then make hash marks in each column corresponding to how you BCS the cow. Or even simpler make columns of thin (3-4), moderate (5-6) and fat (7+).

Add up your tally marks, multiply by the BCS number at the top, and divide by the total number of cows. This will give you the number of cows in each BCS group and the average of your whole herd.

Body condition scoring your cows throughout the production year forces you to look at the data and address management issues that may arise. “If you can’t measure it; you can’t manage it.”

Some excellent resources for body condition scoring are the UNL Body Condition Score App found at the UNL Beef website [beef.unl.edu](http://beef.unl.edu); the Nebraska Extension Publication EC281 Body Condition Scoring Beef Cows: Tool for Managing the Nutrition Program for Beef Herds and the American Angus Association Body Condition Score website [cowbcs.info](http://cowbcs.info).

#### **Management questions to consider:**

Do I body condition score my cows?

How many times during the production year?

Do I use this data to make management decisions?

Does my cow size and milking ability match my feed resources?

Does my calving time match my feed resources?

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#### **BCS Scoring System**

1-2 Very Thin very bony, no fat deposits, no muscle definition emaciated

3-4 Thin backbone is visible, rib bones are visible, full straight muscling in hindquarter

5-6 Moderate(Good) Ribs cannot be seen, backbone not visible, hindquarters plump and full

7 – 9 Fat Abundant fat over ribs and brisket. Back is square and smooth.