

# ON THE RANCH

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November 16-19

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## Preconditioning Calves: Can it Add Value to You as a Cow-Calf Producer?

Weaning time is just around the corner and cow-calf producers are now faced with the decision of calf placement after weaning. Producers have a few options for their calves after weaning. Calves can be sold immediately after weaning, they can undergo a preconditioning period before sale, they can be retained as long or short yearlings and then sold, or they can enter a feedlot with retained ownership.

A preconditioning program is a period of time, typically a minimum of 45 days, in which a cow-calf producer will work to build the health status of the weaned calf prior to sale. Calves are also “bunk broke” during this time and acclimated to a dry feed diet. If calves are sold at the sale barn, sold via an internet auction, or sold to the same feedlot each year, premiums may be awarded to those producers who precondition their calves. Before a producer begins a preconditioning program the economics of the program need to be evaluated carefully.

Two potential gains associated with preconditioning are added premiums at calf sale and added calf weight. Some costs associated with preconditioning programs include: labor, vaccinations, death loss, additional feed costs, and interest expenses on borrowed money. Two additional factors to consider are, the seasonal patterns of the cattle market and the price slide on increased calf weights.

In a recent Drovers article, Dr. John Maday, a Bovine Veterinarian, described the benefits of preconditioning for all aspects of the beef industry. Dr. Maday stated that the long-term average death loss at JBS Five Rivers feedyards, the feedlot he consults for, had always been roughly 1 percent. In the last three years, that value has increased to 2 percent. Initially the increase in death loss was attributed to the drought and poor nutrition early in the calves' lives. However, even after a year of increased moisture the death loss average has not decreased. Dr.

Maday evaluated cattle that had been preconditioned for 45 days prior to feedlot entry and found that those calves experienced one-third the morbidity and one-half the mortality of those calves that were not preconditioned. Preconditioned calves also gained 0.3 more pounds per day compared to calves that were not preconditioned in his study.



A preconditioning program is not for every cow-calf producer. Not only should the factors stated above be considered, but producers have to determine how a 45 day retention of calves will affect their grazing program, if they have the proper facilities to feed calves and bunk break them, and if they have the extra time and labor to dedicate to the weaned calves. As an industry the need to better prepare calves for the feedlot in terms of stress, health, and getting cattle ready to eat a concentrated diet is a must. If more calves are “feedlot ready” the beef industry will see improved cattle health and feedlot performance while potentially reducing the use of antibiotics.

By Meredith Bremer, Nebraska Extension Educator - Photo courtesy of Troy Walz.

# Keep an Eye on Cow Condition

Fall is one of the most important times to evaluate the condition of your cows. It gives you time to take action to ensure that your cows calve in adequate body condition.

We know that body condition at calving is one of the most important factors that determines a cow's ability to rebreed. As Table 1 and Table 2 illustrate, thin cows take longer to come into heat after calving than do cows that calve in better condition.

Cows that are cycling before the start of the breeding season are more likely to get bred early and are therefore more profitable. The more cows that you can have cycling before the start of the breeding season, the higher your conception rates will be and the more compact your calving season.

If your cows are to have the best chance of cycling before the start of the breeding season, they should be in a body condition score of 5 or higher when they calve.

One of the best ways to ensure that your cows are in adequate condition at calving is to make sure that they go into the winter in good condition. Increasing your cows' condition during the winter can be quite expensive. Therefore, it is much more cost effective to fatten thin cows before the onset of winter.

Increasing the body condition of cows in the fall can be accomplished in two ways. You can either increase their nutrient supply by supplementing or moving to better pasture or decrease their nutrient demands by early weaning.

Early weaning is often the more profitable option. This is especially true when grain prices are relatively low. The calves will gain as well, or better, off of the cow as they would on the cow and the cows will gain condition more easily.

Weaning can drop the nutrient requirement of the cow by 25%, or more, depending on the milking ability of the cow and the age of the calf. This will help the thin cows regain body condition more cheaply than they could during the winter.

Once winter approaches, however, options become more limited. Some cows may be too thin to attain a body condition score of five before hay feeding starts. Producers can still save money by sorting and feeding cows according to body condition. Thin cows can be fed the additional feed they need without wasting money by overfeeding cows already in good condition.



Fall is one of the most important times to evaluate the condition of YOUR COWS. Photo courtesy of Troy Walz

The reproductive rate of the cowherd is one of the most important factors affecting cow/calf producers' profitability. A cow's reproductive potential is closely related to her body condition at calving. Body Condition Scoring is a tool producers should use to help them get their cows into optimum body condition at calving. For more in-depth information, see the recently revised NebGuide Body Condition Scoring Beef Cows: A Tool for Managing the Nutrition Program for Beef Herds (<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendlt/ec281.pdf>.) It describes the 1 to 9 of

body condition scoring, complete with pictures and details for assigning scores.

Nebraska Extension also has Android (<http://go.unl.edu/bcsappandroid>) and Apple (<http://go.unl.edu/bcsappios>) versions of a smartphone app to help you learn to assign body condition scores. Additionally, more information on the role of body condition and body condition scoring are available at <http://beef.unl.edu>.

Table 1. Body Condition at Calving and Heat After Calving

Body Condition at Calving	No. Cows	% in Heat –Days Post-calving	
		60	90
Thin (1-4)	272	46	66
Moderate (5-6)	364	61	92
Good (7-9)	50	91	100

(Whitman, Colorado State University, 1975)

Table 2. Effect of Body Condition Score (BCS) at Calving on Postpartum Interval (PPI)

BCS <sup>a</sup>	PPI, days
3	88.5
4	69.7
5	59.4
6	51.7
7	30.6

<sup>a</sup>Body condition scores have been converted from a 5-point system to a 9-point system. (Houghton et al., Purdue University, 1986)

By Jay Jenkins, Nebraska Extension Educator