

# Calving: Are your cows ready for it?

It is the closest thing to a sure bet in the cow-calf industry: Cows need to be in good body condition when they calve.

“Everything in terms of cow-calf production seems to work better when cows calve in excellent body condition,” says Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University (OSU) Extension specialist.

Research shows cows that calve in excellent body condition rebreed consistently on time for the subsequent year’s calf crop. They also tend to produce more, higher-quality colostrum, which provides calves with an increased antibody protection to fight diseases and to withstand winter weather stresses.

“Cows in better body condition have a higher percentage calf crop born and a higher percent that live until weaning time,” Selk says. “Producers are able to wean more pounds of calf per cow in the herd, which translates to more profit potential.”

The OSU Cow Body Condition Scoring System rates cows on a scale of 1 through 9, with 1 representing an animal that is essentially skin and bones and 9 representing an extremely obese animal.

A body condition score (BCS) of 6 is optimum for rebreeding performance, Selk says. Cows of BCS 6 will exhibit a

smooth appearance, and the loin, hip and tail head will be smooth and rounded.

Spring-calving operations mandate substantial feed requirements from purchased feeds or cool-season grasses if good body condition on pregnant cows is to be maintained throughout colder, harsher winter months.

“One question that occasionally gets asked concerns the viability of fall-calving operations,” Selk says.

He says some people have a perception that fall calving requires more-expensive supplemental feed be given to cows that are lactating throughout the entire winter.

“Many spring-calving operations start calving in late January and February,” Selk says. “Therefore, those cows are lactating during much of the winter anyway. In fact, there seem to be some distinct advantages to fall calving in Oklahoma.”

Fall-calving cows that give birth in September and October consistently are in excellent body condition because they have been on pasture without nursing a calf the last half of the summer.

“Cows that are eating high-quality forage the last part of summer without having to provide milk to calves obviously are going to be able to store the extra

nutrients as additional body condition,” Selk says.

Extra body condition at calving enables a cow to return to estrus sooner, which in turn increases the opportunities for a successful rebreeding program. In addition, research shows cows that start cycling before the breeding season tend to have more uniform calf crops.

“Fall-born calves are weaned in early to midsummer, a time when annual calf prices generally are 4% higher per pound (lb.) than calves weaned in late October or early November,” Selk says.

“Put all the fall-calving advantages together, and producers potentially should have more pounds of calf to sell at a time of the year when there are fewer calves being marketed.”

Additional information on spring and fall calving is available at <http://cowcalfcorner.okstate.edu>.



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**Editor’s note:** This article, written by Donald Stotts, is provided by the Oklahoma State University Agricultural Communications Services.