

Ridin' Herd

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Don't overlook condition scoring

It has been a while since we have covered condition-scoring cows in this column. Body condition of spring-calving cows at the time of calving has an effect

on your herd. For spring-calving cows, body condition score (BCS) at calving affects the calf at calving time and cow performance during the breeding season.

Overconditioning cows, especially if the extra condition was “fed on” is wasting money. Underconditioned cows are risky because their performance can be inconsistent. A properly conditioned cow herd at the right time during the production cycle is the goal. The importance of this management practice cannot be overlooked this year as input costs, especially feed costs, continue to increase.

The scoring system

There are six areas on the cow that provide visual cues for the amount of condition (fat) she has. These six areas are the brisket, ribs, back, hooks (hip area), pins and tailhead area. Visualize in your mind, a BCS 3 cow will have no fat in the brisket; over the ribs and back; or in the hooks, pins and tailhead area. A BCS 3 cow will have a crease in her hindquarter. This crease actually indicates she has had to mobilize muscle tissue to meet maintenance energy needs. The BCS 3 cow, as she is viewed from the rear, appears pointed because her spinous processes, hip and pin bones are easily seen.

Contrast this in your mind with a BCS 5 cow. She will have a more “smooth” appearance because she has fat in the areas described previously for the BCS 3 cow that is devoid of condition (fat). The foreribs cannot be seen in a BCS 5 cow, but the 12th and 13th ribs can be seen.

Now contrast this with a BCS 6 cow, which will have fat in the brisket, and the 12th or 13th ribs cannot be seen. There will be two small ponds of fat on either side of the tailhead.

Sometimes inexperienced scorers will catch cows in the chute and hand-palpatate them to train the touch to a visual image. It is critical that when condition-scoring cows, the scorer evaluates condition and not muscle or hair. “Seeing” through the hair can be difficult in the winter.

Cow body condition is a much better gauge of your nutrition program than cow weight. When cows are observed daily, it is difficult to detect changes in condition score. Many times, before you realize a change in condition, cows have actually lost more condition than you would like. Producers need to be disciplined to make sure they are not underestimating condition changes so that appropriate action can be taken.

If you would like to learn more about condition-scoring beef cows, or you have new employees and want them to learn about scoring beef cows, visit <http://beef.unl.edu/learningmodules.shtml> and go through the learning module on condition-scoring.

What score is ideal?

For spring-calving cows, manage cows to calve in a BCS 5. Manage

first-calf heifers to calve at a BCS 6. The extra condition is warranted for the young females because they are still growing, lactating for the first time and trying to get ready for their next pregnancy. Even if you do everything right with these females, their postpartum interval is at least 15 days longer than that of mature cows.

If mature cows are always thin and need to be fed to return to proper condition before calving, check the genetics. Something doesn't match up with the feed resources or your management. Cow size and milk production are the biggest challenges from a nutritional standpoint. Maybe one, or both, of these characteristics doesn't match your feed resources.

For late spring- (May) and summer-calving herds, condition of cows at calving appears to be less important on future performance of the cows. These cows can have a BCS of less than 5 at calving and still have good reproductive performance. This is likely because cows are grazing vegetative grass before (in some cases) and after calving. The caution would be not to calve these cows in thin body condition. Even for summer-calving herds, calving first-calf heifers in BCS 6 is still recommended.

Body condition at calving influences how quickly cows will return to estrus and ready themselves for the next breeding season. At what point a cow calves during the calving season influences her weight at weaning and future performance of the female and male offspring. Cows that calve in the first 21 days of the calving season over an eight- to nine-year period produce 1.5 to 2.0 more weaning weight equivalents during that time period compared to a cow that continues to calve in the third 21-day period of the calving season. Heifer calves born to cows that calve in the first 21-day period have greater pregnancy rates to their first breeding and calve earlier in the calving season, which is a great start to being a productive part of the cow herd. In addition, male calves born early in the calving season when retained into the feedlot are heavier and more grade Choice when finished compared to contemporaries born later in the calving season.

When to score cows

Scoring cows for condition at weaning seems logical. Pay particular attention to young females weaning their first calf. They are the ones that are likely to be thin. Don't separate them off yet; watch them to make sure they begin to regain condition after the nutrient demand for lactation has been removed.

Mature cows that are thin at weaning should bounce back in condition by 60 days postweaning. These are what I term "elastic" cows; they are thin at weaning, but, like a rubber band when stretched and the stress is relieved, return to an acceptable condition once the calf is weaned.

Score spring-calving cows again

about 90 days prior to calving. This is your last opportunity to get cows in the right condition before calving. Trying to add condition to cows after calving is like trying to push water uphill. The diet will need to be fairly dense in energy, and cows that get high-energy diets after calving tend to milk more and not put on condition.

Final thought

Over- and underfeeding the beef herd is not cost-effective. Body condition at calving affects the length of the postpartum interval and the percentage of cows cycling early in the breeding season. Pay particular attention to the condition of young females that have just weaned their first calf. These females will

be the ones in a cow herd that will be challenged most.



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.