



MSU Beef Update

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Question of the Week: Should I body condition score my cows?

Scoring cows on the basis of body condition can be an effective management tool for enhancing reproductive performance within the cow herd. The critical period during the reproductive calendar for body condition is at calving. Problems associated with body condition can surface in several ways: increased post partum anestrus, services per conception, calving interval, percent open cows, and parasite and disease susceptibility. Additionally, lowered calf weaning weights as a result of lowered milk production can occur. The latter part of the second trimester and early third trimester of pregnancy is an important time period for cow nutrition. Management decisions involving cow nutrition are important to achieve the best cow body condition at calving and later post calving reproductive success. Body condition scoring (BCS) - aids in nutrition management and enhances reproductive performance of the cow herd.

Understanding the BCS System

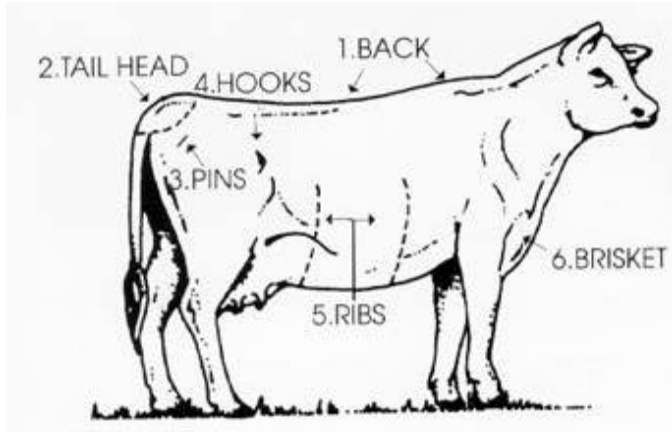
Body condition scores basically describe the degree of fatness of a cow. A numerical range of 1 to 9 identifies varying degrees of fatness, with 1 being very thin and 9 being excessively fat. To use the BCS system effectively, a producer must understand which areas of the cow anatomy deposit fat (see figure below). When scoring cows for body condition, be sure to account for pregnancy status, gut fill, hair coat and age. An average score for body condition is "5". Once you have identified a BCS "5" through comparison determine the scores of the rest of your herd (see BCS chart, back page).

Do not make the mistake of using live weight as the determining factor for body condition and fat reserves. Simply, gut fill and pregnancy status prevent weight from being an accurate indicator of fatness. Animals can have different live weights but similar body condition scores. Likewise, animals of similar live weight, may differ in body condition.

The Best Score

For on-farm application grouping cows using a BCS range is more practical. Cows scoring 4 or lower are considered thin and normally experience pregnancy rates of 60 percent and lower. The best range for BCS is 5 through 7. Cows in this range are moderate in body fatness and exhibit pregnancy rates over 75 percent. BCS 8 and 9 are relatively fat and exhibit lower reproductive performance and higher cow maintenance









costs. Establish cow groups on the basis of thin, moderate and fat body condition. The key to successful on-farm application of the BCS system is identifying cow groups, not individual numerical scores.



Body Condition scoring can be done by visually determining the fat cover in the areas shown (Oklahoma State University).

Scoring for Profit

Feed costs can account for 60 percent of the total cow/calf budget. Producers can lower cow costs without sacrificing reproductive performance when sorting cows on the BCS system. In managing feed resources, identifying BCS groups can allow more efficient and economical use of feedstuffs. Separate cows on the basis of thin, moderate and fat body condition. This approach will better match feedstuff quality with the nutritional requirements of each cow group. In short, use higher quality feedstuffs for thin cows and lower quality for fat cows. The BCS system can improve herd health, feed-resource management, reproductive performance and calf weaning weights. All these benefits associated with the BCS system can improve profits for beef producers.

BCS Group Descriptions		
Thin	Moderate	Fat
		
1 <i>Emaciated</i> --Little muscle left.	*5 <i>Moderate</i> --All bones covered; neither thin nor fat.	8 <i>Fat</i> --Blocky appearance bone over back not visible.
		
2 <i>Very Thin</i> --Bones visible no fat considerable muscle loss.	*6 <i>Good</i> --Smooth appearance; some fat on back and tail.	9 <i>Very Fat</i> --Tail buried and in fat.
		
3 <i>Thin</i> --Foreribs visible; some muscle loss.	*7 <i>Very Good</i> --Smooth appearance with fat over back and tail head.	
		
4 <i>Borderline</i> --Forerib not visible 12th and 13th ribs visible.		
* Optimum BCS level for reproductive performance		

Source of Information: Scoring Cows Can Improve Profits by **David A. Mangione**
Ohio State University Extension