

Body Condition Scoring Beef Cows

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Even though fall is just starting, it is time to pay attention to the condition in which our cows go into winter. If they're thin at calving time, we will sacrifice colostrum quality and quantity, calf vigor, and subsequent fertility during next summer's breeding season.

Body condition score (BCS) on a beef cow is the closest thing we have to a dip stick for determining, at a glance, her nutritional status. But scoring cows properly and really benefitting from this tool requires a bit more effort and observation than simply looking and thinking, "They look a little thin". The reason for talking about BCS *now* is that there's still time to adjust nutrient supply to get the cows into the target BCS by spring calving time.

To properly evaluate an individual cow, you should look at her topline, brisket, ribs, flank, round, and tail head. The "ideal" or "target" BCS for cows at the time of calving is the BCS = 5. This cow will show the last 1-2 ribs first thing in the morning before feeding, have good fullness of muscle in the round with definite muscle definition, the spine will be apparent but individual vertebrae will not be discernable, and there are no obvious fat depots behind the shoulder or around the tailhead. We would say this cow has a good "bloom". A borderline thin cow (BCS = 4) will clearly show 3-4 ribs first thing in the morning, will have no obvious fat depots in the brisket or tailhead, and you can see the individual vertebrae along the topline. The cow still shows some muscle through the round, and you could say she looks "healthy but thin". In a borderline fleshy cow (BCS = 6) the ribs and vertebrae will not be obvious, as they are covered by fat. The muscling down through the round will be plump and full, but muscle definition is still apparent, and there will be small but noticeable fat deposits behind the shoulder, in the flank, brisket, and around the tailhead.

A change in BCS (from BCS 4 to 5, for example) requires addition of from 75 to 100 lbs live body weight, depending on the mature size or frame size of the cows. If you're 2 months from the start of calving and need to add 1 BCS, you'll need to feed the cows for maintenance, last 1/3 of gestation, and an additional 1.0 to 1.5 lb/day gain. This means increasing the amount of good quality hay as well as the amount of supplement. Thin cows (BCS 4 or below) can be separated off and fed a higher plane of nutrition. The argument can be made that this creates "welfare cows". However, good record-keeping will indicate whether these cows are perennial "hardkeepers" or if they are simply too young or too old to compete with the mature cows. If they're too young, another year of maturity should cure this; if they're too old, you may consider culling them after weaning time. The key here is that good record keeping allows *YOU* to cull intentionally based on productivity, not based on lack of observation and management. Cows which calve below a BCS 5 will delay their return to estrus and breed back late. If these cows do not maintain a 365-day calving cycle, they could after 1-2 late breedings effectively "cull themselves" due to being open at preg check time. Young cows are especially susceptible to this possibility because they are gestating a calf, nursing a calf, and still growing frame and muscle themselves. Unfortunately, young cows are the future of your herd and possibly your most progressive genetics. Hopefully these cows aren't culled simply for lack of nutrients. Body condition scoring the herd is a simple process, and can be done on a large paper tablet. Make columns for BCS 3, 4, 5, and 6 and as you pass through the herd first thing in the morning, make a tick mark for each cow in each of the columns. Multiply the number of 3's by 3, the 4's by 4, etc., add up the total score and divide by the total number of tick marks. This should give you an average BCS for the herd. But more important than the average is how many cows you've got in the critical scores of 3 and 4. 4's can be easily fed into the 5 range, but 3's could potentially not cycle in time to stay in the herd. If 3's can be fed up into the 4-range, they'll at least have a chance to breed, albeit late during the normal breeding season.

Take a little time to truly, critically evaluate the nutrient status of your cow herd this winter, and use this simple, but powerful tool to manage the fertility and health of your herd going into next spring, and give yourself full control over the genetics of your herd for years to come.