

Body Condition Scoring the Cow Herd

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The body condition of a cow or heifer is very important to their productivity. Body condition is simply a measure of a cow's degree of fatness which is very important for maintaining reproductive function and milk production for the calf. Cattlemen have long recognized the importance of body condition subjectively using terms like good, moderate, or poor condition to make management decisions such as forage and supplement needs, and to predict future performance.

To make body condition more objective, scientist began to develop scoring systems to place numeric values on the body condition of cows and heifers. One system used values of 1 to 5 with 1 being very thin, 3 being average, and 5 being very fat.

The scoring system most used by scientist and cattlemen today is one with scores of 1 to 9, with 1 being emaciated cows, 5 being cows in moderate condition with the 12th and 13th ribs showing when cows move or have been shrunk, and 9 being very fat cows with no bone structure seen or felt and tail head berried in fat. This scoring system, with photos, is available from UF/IFAS publication SP 144, Effect of Body Condition on Productivity in Beef Cattle, authored by Bill Kunkle, Bob Sand, and Owen Rae. The publication is found on the Range Cattle REC or EDIS web site at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/scripts/htmlgen.exe?DOCUMENT_AN004. The nice part about body condition scoring is that it gives a producer an immediate appraisal of a single animal or an entire herd. Cows can be scored in the cow pen or in the pasture from the pick-up truck.

The important relationship to body condition score is reproductive performance. Field studies in Florida and other states show a positive link

between pregnancy rate and body condition scores taken at either pregnancy testing, calving, or during the breeding season. The publication reference above by Kunkle and others (SP 144) showed pregnancy percentages of 13, 46, 66, and 94 for brood cows with condition scores of 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively (8 field trials).

The ideal body condition score is 5 or higher for brood cows at calving. A body condition score of 6 or higher would be a better target for first calf heifers.

Above, we discussed specific body condition scores of cows in a herd and their subsequent pregnancy rate. The importance of body condition scoring is not only to predict what will happen, but to determine what actions need to be taken to have a better reproductive performance. If cows are thin at weaning or at calving a good supplementation program and better pasture would have a positive effect on their conception rate during the following breeding season. Cows could also be divided according to condition score with thin cows offered better pasture and/or more supplement.

Body condition scoring is one of the simplest but most useful management tools available to cattlemen. Make it work for you in an efficient cow/calf production program.

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