

Body Condition Scoring

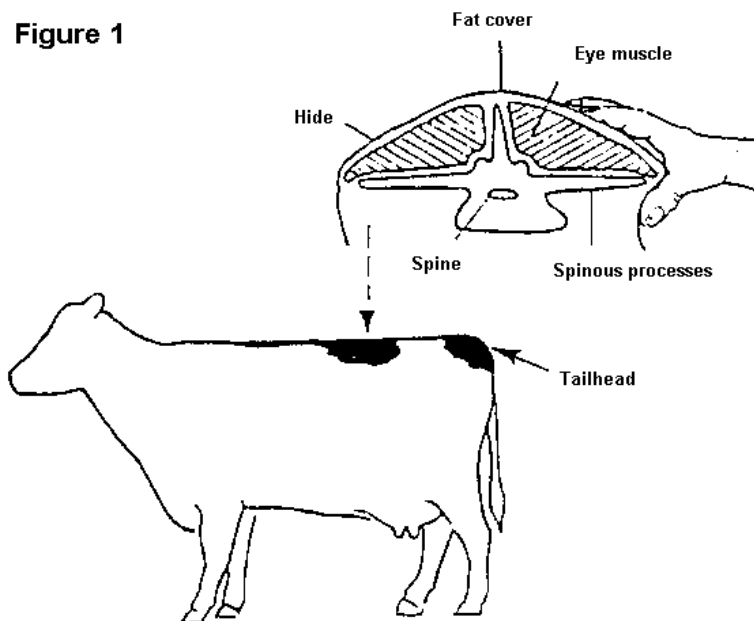
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The Scoring System

Body condition scoring is a management tool that can help the cow/calf producer better utilize his year round feed supply and achieve better reproductive and calf rearing performance. Condition scoring allows you to place a relatively objective condition score to each of your cows. Depending upon their body fat covering, a number between 1 (very thin) and 5 (very fat) will be assigned. Let's look briefly at how this system works.

Back in the mid 70s, several researchers in Scotland created a system of condition scoring for application to beef cows. The system consists of five grades determined by appraisal of the fat cover over the loin area between the hook (hip) bone and the last rib. (See Figure 1).



Areas to handle in assessing condition score

Table 1: Condition scoring descriptions.

Score #	Description
1	Outline of the spine is very prominent and individual short ribs are sharp with no fat cover. Individual ribs and tail head are prominent.
2	Short ribs have a rounded look but can still be felt. Individual ribs and tail head have some fat cover.
3	Short ribs are felt with firm pressure, tail head has fat cover that is easily felt.
4	Short ribs cannot be detected even with firm pressure; fatty deposits around tail head are quite obvious.
5	Characteristic bone structure is no longer noticeable; flesh hangs from the tail head and mobility may be impaired.

- Scores may fall between these values, if so an intermediate number is assigned (e.g. 2.5).

Let's briefly look at where cattle should be for optimum production, based on calving season.

Winter Calving - February

- Generally, winter calving cows can be bred at lower condition score than can be autumn calvers. This is because winter calvers are bred on a rising plane of nutrition
- The target condition score for winter calvers should be 2.5 and not below 2.0 at breeding
- These early calvers should not be allowed to lose any body condition between calving and pasture turnout. At weaning these animals should be in condition 3.

Table 2: Winter Calving-February

	February Calving	April Breeding	November Weaning
Condition Score	3	2.5 (Cows) 3.0 (Heifers)	3.0

Spring Calving - May

- The major difference between this group and the February calvers is that condition score can be 2.0 - 2.5 (instead of 2.5) at calving
- By July (breeding) the cows have regained body reserve, to the point where they should be condition score 3.0
- At weaning and housing these animals are usually 3.5. A fall score of 3.5 enables feed levels to be reduced during the latter stages of pregnancy.

Table 3: Spring Calving- May

	May Calving	July Breeding	November Weaning
Condition Score	2.0 – 2.5	3.0	3.0 - 3.5

Fall Calving - October

- Condition scoring is especially applicable to fall calving
- Fall calvers should not be overly fat at calving, a score of 4.0 is the maximum to avoid calving difficulties

- A score of 2.5 is adequate for rebreeding, but may be difficult to obtain due to poor winter feeding conditions
- A balance between scores of calving and rebreeding must be obtained
- Once safely within calf, cows may be allowed to lose condition (1.5 - 2.0) to turnout

Table 4: Fall Calving (October – November)

	October- November Calving	January Breeding	August Weaning
Condition Score	3.0 – 3.5	2.5	2.5 – 3.0

- Remember that post calving nutrition to rebreeding is vital if cows are to conceive within the desired sixty day period.

Practical Application

1. The establishment of an objective scoring system eliminates the use of broad terms such as “thin” and “fat”. The system applies across breeds and herds. Individual condition records can be kept on a year round basis to determine the success of feeding/or general management changes.
2. Condition scoring will increase awareness of winter feeding programs and the impact of body condition on reproductive management.
3. Use body condition scoring as an indicator of management. Become aware of why your cows are thin (2.0 or less) or fat (3.5 or greater). Look at causative factors in management and know what the potential problems with each condition will be. Above all, strive to make positive management changes.

Remember that body condition problems will not only impact performance this year, but will also affect the calf and cow's performance in the long term.

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