Assigning a Body Condition Scores for Beef Cattle

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There are many methods cattlemen use to evaluate the body condition (BCS) of their cattle. Most methods involve using a numerical system that ranks cattle on a scale. A common method of body condition scoring uses a scale of one to nine, with one being emaciated and nine being obese. These numerical scores are subjective and may differ slightly from one evaluator and another.

To begin, a producer can gain experience using body condition scores by assigning cattle into one of three categories: thin (BCS of 1, 2, and 3), Moderate (BCS of 4, 5, and 6) or fat (7, 8, and 9). Most cattle in Florida are not managed to excessive weights; therefore, few would be identified as fat. As experience is gained and the evaluator becomes familiar with details of each specific body condition score, these categories can be further broken into actual condition scores. Research reported by the University of Florida demonstrates that as cattle decrease from a BCS of five to four, they may have reduced pregnancy rates by as much as 30% and this loss is increased an additional 30% when cattle drop from a four to a three. The bottom line is that cattle in poor condition typically have a difficult time becoming pregnant. What percentage of your herd’s pregnancy rate are you willing to sacrifice due to providing poor nutrition?

Ideally, cattle would be at a body condition score of 6 at calving and maintained at a BCS of 5 at breeding. Maintaining cattle in moderate BCS (4, 5, and 6) doesn’t mean they will become pregnant, but extremes in any situation (emaciated; 1, 2 and 3 or fat; 7, 8, and 9) can result in reduced pregnancies.

When should body condition be evaluated?
Every time you ride through your herd what are you looking for? More than likely you are counting to make sure everyone is where they are supposed to be, looking for that sick animal or one that may need some special care, and whether you assign a BCS or not, you are probably looking at the overall condition of your cattle. These evaluations help you to determine when you should adjust the nutrition of the herd or when to perform other herd health activities. Record your assessment or BCS of each animal in the herd a minimum of three times per year (weaning, 90 days pre-calving and at breeding) and adjust nutrition accordingly.

The time period from weaning to calving has proven to be the easiest and most economical time to add condition to cattle. Producers who fail to evaluate body condition and adjust the nutritional needs of the cow herd after weaning may have difficulty adding condition later in the production cycle.
Evaluating BCS approximately 90 days pre-calving allows sufficient time to adjust the ration to ensure cows are in adequate body condition at calving. Since a substantial amount of fetal development occurs during the last two months of gestation, producers must ensure that any bred female has the right nutrition prior to calving. Caution should be taken with heifers prior to calving since they are still growing and over feeding during this time may result in calving difficulty and fat deposits in the utter, resulting in reduced milking ability.

Adding condition to thin cattle from calving to breeding may prove to be more difficult than you may think. This re-emphasizes the importance of evaluating cattle for BCS prior to calving and making ration changes to achieve optimum BCS prior to calving.

Body condition score at calving time provides the best prediction of re-breeding performance. Approximately 90% of cattle in optimum body condition at calving will resume estrus cyclic activity 60 days postpartum. Assessing body condition at breeding may offer useful information that may help explain reduced pregnancy rates.