

Body Condition Scoring Cattle and Why it's Important

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Body condition scoring prior to breeding is extremely important to maintaining conception rate and the yearly calving interval. Due to the drought in the past two years, producers have had a limited feed supply through pasture and harvested feeds. This has led to some cows being in poorer body condition than we would like them to be at breeding.

Body condition scoring is based on a 1 to 9 score with 1 being extremely thin and 9 being extremely obese. A body condition score of 5 to 6 is optimal. When looking at the cow herd, a body condition score 5 cow will have the last two ribs visible, no fat in the brisket and the hooks and pins are visible. As body condition is increased the ribs will not be visible, the brisket will fill with fat and the hooks and pins will not be visible. As body condition is reduced more ribs will become visible, the brisket will tighten up and the hooks and pins will become more pronounced.

Fat cover and deposition is important for reproduction to provide additional energy for uterine involution after calving and for the estrous cycle. Cows with a body condition score of 5 or greater at breeding have a better chance to successfully rebreed and maintain the pregnancy. Maintaining a body condition score of 5 to 6 throughout the year helps provide cows with the extra energy needed during stressful events, such as calving and weaning. Maintaining good body condition also helps with colostrum and milk quality and the calf immune system.

Not only is body condition important for the cow herd but also for the bulls. Bulls should also be in a body condition score 5 to 6 during the breeding season. Bull body condition plays a large role in spermatogenesis production and quality. The bull spermatogenesis cycle is 60-days long, so during a breeding soundness exam if the bulls were in poor condition most of the winter, this could negatively affect their passing of the exam. Bulls will also lose weight during the breeding season due to the distance traveled to the cows for breeding, water source, and feed, so be prepared for them to lose body condition too.

The most difficult part of breeding season is increasing the body condition of thin cows. Over the past 2 years we have experienced limited feed availability, and this is continuing. Adding body condition to cows during early lactation is difficult and requires a nutrient dense diet. This can also be a challenge as this also coincides with pasture green-up.

Due to much needed precipitation in the area, we have lush, green grass, which can be between 60-70% water. These high moisture grasses are very palatable and digestible, and cattle must consume more of them to meet their nutritional needs. During the spring as the grass begins to grow, this can be a difficult time for cattle because if they are turned out, quantity may be limiting, depending on how many cows are within the pasture, which can lead to limited nutrients. Additionally, once cows are turned out onto green grass, many no longer will consume harvested forages unless access to the pasture is limited.

Body condition scoring your cows and bulls prior to the breeding season can help with management decisions. If cows are thin and need a better plane of nutrition, harvested feeds may

need to be fed. Thin cows tend to struggle to rebreed and have poor reproductive performance. Therefore, maintain an optimum body condition score of 5 to 6 will improve reproductive performance and produce healthier calves.