

The Importance of Body Condition Scoring in Beef Cattle

Body condition scoring is an easy and practical method of assessing the nutritional status of your cows. The method consists of assigning each cow a numerical value from 1 (thin) to 9 (obese), based on amount of body fat (Table 4-5).

Body condition scoring (BCS) system for beef cattle

Group	BCS	Description
Thin condition	1	Emaciated —Cow is extremely emaciated with no palpable fat detectable over spinous processes (back bone), transverse processes (edge of loin), edge of hip bones or ribs. Tailhead and ribs project quite prominently.
	2	Poor —Cow still appears somewhat emaciated but tailhead and ribs are less prominent. Individual spinous processes are still rather sharp to the touch but some tissue cover exists along the spine.
	3	Thin —Ribs are still individually identifiable but not quite as sharp to the touch. There is obvious palpable fat along spine and over tailhead with some tissue cover over dorsal portion of ribs.
Borderline condition	4	Borderline —Individual ribs are no longer visually obvious. The spinous processes can be identified individually on palpation but feel rounded rather than sharp. Some fat covers ribs, transverse process and hip bones.
	5	Moderate —Cow has good overall appearance. Upon palpation, fat cover over ribs feels spongy and areas on either side of tailhead now have palpable fat cover.
Optimum moderate condition	6	High moderate —Firm pressure now needs to be applied to feel spinous processes. A high degree of fat is palpable over ribs and around tailhead.
	7	Good —Cow appears fleshy and obviously carries considerable fat. Very spongy fat cover over ribs and round tailhead. "Rounds" or "pones" becoming obvious. Some fat around vulva and in pelvis.
	8	Fat —Cow very fleshy and overconditioned. Spinous processes almost impossible to palpate. Cow has large fat deposits over ribs, around tailhead and below vulva. "Rounds" or "pones" are obvious.
Fat condition	9	Extremely fat —Cow has lost definition. Contours disappear across back and sides as cow takes on a smooth, block-like appearance. Tailhead and hips buried in fatty tissue and look blocky; "rounds" or "pones" of fat are protruding. Bone structure no longer visible and barely palpable. Animal's mobility may even be impaired by large fatty deposits.

(Adapted from Richards et al, J Anim Sci 62:300, 1986. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.)

Table 4-5—Body condition scoring guidelines

	Score	Body Condition
Thin	1	Emaciated
	2	Poor
Borderline	3	Thin
	4	Borderline
Optimum moderate	5	Moderate
	6	High Moderate
Fat	7	Good
	8	Fat
	9	Extremely Fat

Body condition scores and calving

There are four categories: thin, borderline, optimum moderate, and fat. For all practical purposes, you want your mature cows to have a body condition score of 5 or 6. Since heifers are still growing themselves (like teenagers), you may want them to score nearer to 6 than to 5.

Body condition should be determined both by observation AND by touch twice a year, once at calving and again at pregnancy-check time.

A cow that's too thin will very likely have a weak calf and not return to heat quickly. A cow that is clearly too fat means feed is being wasted on this animal, and she's probably going to have calving difficulties. A cow with optimum body condition is in prime condition for mothering and rebreeding.

After you've scored your cows, you may need to sort them and put them on different feeding schedules to achieve a herd body condition score of 5 to 6 at calving. Sorting will allow for better use of hay and forage. There is tremendous variation in hay and forage quality, and it is essential that heifers receive superior hay and forage with adequate protein and energy content. The same ration would overfeed mature cows and be wasted.

Second-calf heifers also need special attention because they are the most difficult animals to rebreed. Since they're lactating and still growing, their nutritional needs might not be met unless they're given better quality feed.

But, what exactly are a cow's nutritional needs? It mainly depends on the time of year. The National Research Council, or NRC, has established guidelines for feeding cows in different stages of production. Cows need a constant level of calories for normal body maintenance and another small constant amount to support grazing activity. The energy requirements that really vary, though, are those needed to support growth of the fetus and those for making milk. It's clear that a cow needs to be in optimum condition at calving since energy and protein requirements are at their greatest then.

Provided by: Pfizer Animal Health Cow-Calf Health Guide