

News Column  
Stacy Campbell  
K-State Research & Extension  
September 10, 2015

## **Simple tool to monitor cow condition**

When we talk about weaning, the typical focus is on the calf. What their health is like, how much they weigh and marketing strategies are common points of emphasis. Tradition often determines actual weaning dates. However, range condition and cow body condition should also factor into the timing. Energy requirements, for the cow, drop substantially at weaning. The better the forage quality available at weaning, the more condition the cow can regain without added supplementation. Trying to add body condition when nutrient requirements are climbing due to advancing gestation and cold weather becomes increasingly difficult and expensive.

### ***What is body condition scoring?***

Body condition scores (BCS) describe the relative fatness of a cow based on a nine-point scale with 1 being extremely thin and 9 being extremely obese. A score in the range of 5-6 is preferred. It is an effective management tool to use to evaluate the nutritional status of the herd. In order for body condition scoring to be effective it must be done throughout various stages of production. Those stages include: late lactation, weaning, 100 days before calving, calving, and at breeding. This allows you to monitor the condition of your herd during critical points throughout the year. You cannot manage what you don't measure.

### ***What are the guidelines for body condition scoring?***

A condition score 5 cow will still have one rib visible when her rumen is not very full from grazing or drinking, her topline is smooth and there is no evidence of excess fat around the tail head. The spinous processes or individual vertebrae are visible in a body condition 4 cow so the topline no longer has a smooth appearance and she has more than the last two ribs visible. She can be differentiated from a body score 3 cow who is starting to lose muscle mass as a result of using muscle for energy. A body score 3 cow has a flat loin (no muscle shape) and vertebrae can be easily observed.

### ***Why should I body condition score?***

One of the most important reasons to monitor body condition is for reproductive efficiency. For a cow to maintain a 365-day calving interval, she must re-breed by 83 days after calving (gestation length of a beef cow = 282 days). The length of the postpartum interval for cows that calve in a condition score of 3 and 4 may range from 80 to 120 days compared to 45 to 55 days for cows that calve in a BCS of 5 and 6. Cows with low body condition at calving, if they do rebred, often have late born calves that weigh less at weaning.

With weaning upon us, now is the best time to improve body condition scores going into calving season because, mid to late gestation, dry cows have lower nutrient requirements than that of a lactating cow. Scoring your cows during weaning allows you to separate the thin cows from the fleshy cows. By doing this you can feed the fleshy cows for maintenance and the thin cows for gain. Generally, one BCS equals 60-80 pounds of live weight in cows depending on the frame size and breed type.

If you would like further information or aids to assist in body condition scoring or would like some help in getting started doing this contact me at the Ellis County Extension Office at 785-628-9430.