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Body Condition Score

As I've entered my mid-forties, there are signs of my changing body condition (fatter, less hair, etc...) but that's not where this article is going. Those who attended the Tailgate Talk last week got to hear me ramble on about cow body condition scoring assessment and the opportunities to add body condition in fall. Since that's fresh on my mind, let's dive in a bit to BCS.

The Body Condition Score (BCS) system used for beef cows range from 1 to 9, with a score of 1 reflecting an emaciated cow and a score of 9 an obese cow. The BCS system allows producers to visually assess their cow herd using numbers to objectively describes the amount of condition or fat reserve of an animal. Cow body condition score is closely related to reproductive efficiency and is a more reliable indicator of nutritional status of a cow than is body weight. Concepts are similar in other species; with dairy cattle, goats, sheep and swine using five-point scales.

Body condition is important because there is a close relationship between BCS at calving and the first 90 days after calving to reproductive success. In addition, cow body condition influences the calf's ability to develop a strong immune system. Don't forget the bulls! BCS can affect fertility in the male side of the equation too. BCS is a snapshot of cowherd management, similar to a financial balance sheet, and should be assessed at specific production points throughout the year.

You can evaluate body condition anytime you are around cattle, but it is recommended 60 to 90 days before calving, at calving, and weaning. This can simply be done with a tally of the number of cows that fall into each BCS category while riding, walking, or driving through the cattle or chute side as processing. You can record this on about anything, but the [K-State Body Condition Record Book \(MF3277\)](#) is a great tool for recording scores.

Knowing BCS is one thing, but how and when is it beneficial to work to change scores? Obese cows can be an issue, but generally this discussion centers on getting flesh on thin or borderline cows (BCS 3 or 4) by moving them to more optimal scores of 5 or 6. One body condition score is roughly seventy-five pounds, so adding that much condition doesn't happen overnight. The more time you have, less energy demands the animal has, the fewer scores you have to jump and the higher quality of feed available; all have direct impact on changing body condition score.

Fall is an excellent time to add condition in spring calving herds. Cows are second trimester gestation, have weaned a calf and are going through the period of lowest maintenance energy requirement. This is also 90-120 days away from common calving windows, which gives the additional time factor. Moderate quality feedstuffs can be used to add condition, with cool season grasses having their secondary production window (if it rains!) and crop residues are available, some with high nutritional value cover crops as we discussed last week at tailgate talk. This can be accomplished on low quality forages with protein supplementation as well.

[K-State's Guide to Body Condition Scoring Beef Cows and Bulls \(MF3274\)](#) highlights work from Spitzer et al on first calf heifer rebreeding rates, looking at BCS. The study shows that heifers going into breeding who were at score 4, had a 43% pregnancy rate at Day 40 of the breeding season. Comparatively, heifers at score 6 showed a 90% pregnancy rate, a substantial difference. This guide gives good additional information on Beef Body Condition Scoring. Hopefully Body Condition Scoring is, or will be, a part of your herd management plan.