



Maintaining Year-Round BCS for Optimum Cow Performance

by *Danielle Beard Hayden*

As cattle prices continue to increase, producers and researchers alike are recognizing now, more than ever, the importance of maintaining herd health. One factor in maintaining herd health is using body condition

scoring (BCS). BCS is a management tool for monitoring the nutritional status of beef cows ranging on a 1-9 scale method — 1 a severely thin cow, 9 an extremely obese cow. See “Body condition score reference chart,” Pages 230 and 231.

Bob Weaber, cow-calf Extension specialist at Kansas State University, stresses the importance of producers being aware of their cows’ BCS year-round.

“Three or four times a year is ideal, but at a minimum, we want people to start thinking about it 100 days before calving, because we want cows to be in a 5 or 6 by calving time,” he explains. “If you are any later than that, there probably won’t be enough time to fix any problems.”

He explains a cow at a BCS of 4 and 100 days out of calving season would need to gain a pound a day between observation and calving in order to reach a BCS of 5.

“Which is pretty easy and economic to do, but if you have 3s and you want them at 5s, that means she’s got to gain somewhere between 180 to 200 lb. of body weight. Now all the sudden you are talking about two pounds a day, and that’s when things become difficult,” Weaber says.

While cows will perform well at a BCS of 5, Weaber adds, heifers need to be closer to a 6, because they are still trying to grow and may need some extra energy reserves as they start to lactate.

“If you are managing heifers, they are probably further from green grass than cows, so having some insurance policy (with a BCS of 6) in heifers is never a bad idea,” he adds.

However, it is not just the 100 days before calving that need to be focused on for improving BCS. Weaber adds producers need to monitor their cows’ condition during calving, especially those with long calving seasons.

“Cows that calved at the beginning of the calving season might have dropped into 4s, so we’ll need to either get green grass or some other form of nutrients to them in order for them to be between a 5 or 6 before breeding season. We’ll always have fluctuation of body condition score; the idea is to try and manage it as economically as possible in the production cycle,” he says.

To maintain BCS, Weaber recommends producers have feedstuffs and facilities available to early wean calves and put them on feed, or early wean calves and sell them.

“Two reasons for that,” he says. “One, if you’re in a drought, weaning calves drastically reduces nutrient requirement to cows. A lactating cow versus a dry cow — huge difference in body condition — so once we wean calves we can really extend the grazing season in a dry year and in a regular year as well.”

If cows get into a low BCS, the cost of putting that body condition score back on is expensive, he explains. Therefore, maintaining an aligned nutrient requirement with range availability is the objective. Maintaining this requirement keeps producers from having to push a lot of expensive high-quality feedstuffs at their herds.

“If you get into late August and you have cows that are thin, trying to get calves weaned — even if you’re in fescue or bluegrass country, where you have a flush of cool season grasses in the fall or on dry native grass like in Kansas — we can put on a body condition score or a score and a half just by feeding some protein supplementation and leaving the cows alone,” he adds.

In order for this increase in BCS to work, cows can’t be lactating or gestating a third trimester calf. Weaber explains routine evaluation of cows at decision points along the biological cycle will affect ups and downs in the cycle, as well as keep cows from getting to thin.

“I really like producers to think about BCS as the speedometer or gas gauge in a car — whichever way you want to look at it — and keeping tabs on that all the time is



the first objective. The old saying, ‘you can’t manage what you can’t measure,’ is absolutely true on body condition score,” Weaber says.

Producer perspective

‘Keeping tabs’ on the BCS of their herds and instilling a sustained nutrition program is something on which Hereford producers across the U.S. are putting more emphasis. Scott Betz of Trenton, Mo., says harsh weather conditions are what drove him to re-evaluate his cow nutrition program.

“We started feeding Purina’s liquid Accuration during the drought of 2012 because we needed to stretch our grass,” Betz says.

According to him, by adding a supplement to his cows during that summer, he saw an overall improvement in his conception rates, especially in his younger (2- to 3-year-old) cows, and an overall improvement in body condition. Due to the increased nutrition, his cows maintained their

improved BCS throughout the drought, a development that sold Betz on continuing with a sustained nutrition program.

“At first we just intended to use it to get through the drought, until we had grass to use, but after we preg checked, we had cows that were bred that never should’ve been bred. Now we use this program year-round, and from what we’ve seen, especially with cattle prices, I don’t know if you can afford not to,” he adds.

Like Betz, Lou Ellen Harr from northeast Ohio saw an improvement in her younger cows after implementing a sustained nutrition program.

“I normally don’t AI (artificially inseminate) 2-year-olds; we just kick them out with the bull, but last year, we had 2-year-olds cycling quick enough that I ended up AIing half of them,” Harr says.

A polled Hereford producer, Harr said she first became aware

continued on page 232...



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— Bob Weaber

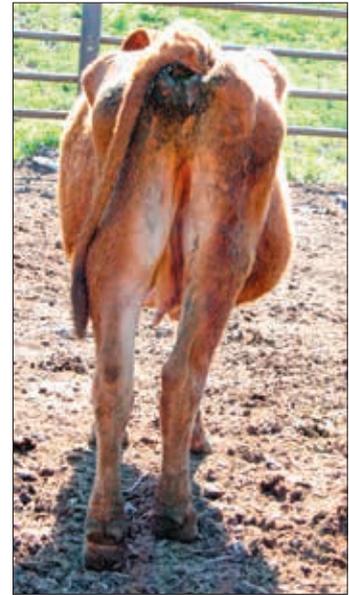
Body condition score reference chart



Photo Courtesy of Texas A&M University

BCS 1
Emaciated

Cow is extremely emaciated. Tailhead and ribs project prominently. No detectable fat over backbone and hips.



BCS 2
Poor

Somewhat emaciated. Tailhead and ribs are less prominent. Backbone still sharp.

BCS 5
Moderate
Good overall appearance. Palpable fat cover on the ribs.



BCS 7
Good

Fleshy condition. Carries considerable spongy fat over ribs and around tailhead.



Source: Whole Herd Total Performance Records (TPR™) User's Guide

BCS 3 Thin

Ribs are less sharp but definable. Some fat on spine.



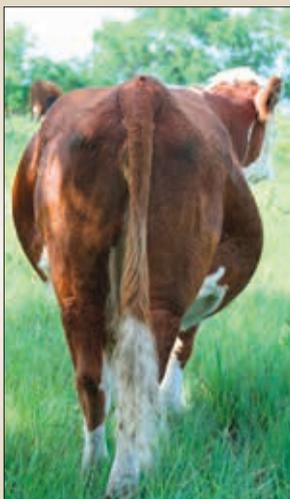
BCS 4 Borderline

Ribs not obvious. Some fat over ribs and hip bones. The backbone can be identified but feels rounded, not sharp.



BCS 6 High Moderate

Firm pressure needed to feel backbone. High degree of fat is now palpable over ribs and around tailhead.



BCS 8 Fat

Very fleshy and over-conditioned. Large fat deposits over ribs and around tailhead. Backbone almost impossible to palpate.



BCS 9 Extremely fat

Cow has lost definition. Hips buried in fat tissue, looks blocky. May be impaired in mobility. Bone structure no longer visible.



Photo Courtesy of Texas A&M University



of the program a couple of years ago. After doing some research, she decided it would be worth her time to try it.

“We began working harder on not being quite so tough on our cows when they were weaning a calf. We still try to match our resources with their nutrient requirement, and we don’t get them ‘sale ready’ in that late second/third trimester, but we’ve been working at maintaining that body condition score between a 5½ or 6,” she explains.

Harr credits a good mineral program, occasionally adding a protein lick tub and forage testing for their consistent BCS.

Importance of forage testing

“We are big believers in forage testing. If you don’t have your forages tested, you don’t know where you are at with nutritional value,” she says. “I would sure advise others to forage test. Paying for a \$25 analysis of that sample can save a lot of money if you find you don’t need to purchase additional feed for those cows, especially during a time of year when their nutritional needs aren’t very high.”

According to Harr, being aware of both the nutritional value of your forage as well as where your cows are in their nutritional needs will always pay off.

“There have been times when we were amazed to find out we

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had hay that already met those cows’ needs. Where, if we had paid attention to the feed salesman, there would’ve been some additional feed supplementation,” she laughs.

Weaber also stresses the economic importance of maximizing your forage potential in order to maintain consistent BCS.

“I’m pretty tight, so I like to have cows get as much nutrient demand supplied by range and forage; that way I don’t have to

provide extra hay or extra protein supplementation. So trying to do a better job of allocating nutrients from a management standpoint, that I have available, is the strategy I like,” he says.

Along with early weaning and managing available forage, Weaber suggests changing winter feeding programs to sort off young and old thin cows and separating them from the cows at a desirable BCS in order to have better control over how feed is allocated.

“If you’ve done your job and sorted them out by 120 days before calving season, you can provide enough additional low-quality forage and protein supplement to a group of thin cows to get them back where you want and subsequently decrease the amount of nutrients you allocate to the cows that are adequate BCS,” he explains. “At the end of the day, you will probably feed the same amount of feed, but you’ll have done a better job allocating it to the cows that need it.”

Weaber says, commonly, the cows that are the fleshiest are the most aggressive at the feed bunk. Since they are the most physically fit, they do a better job of dominating the feed bunk or hay feeder space than young, timid or old, thin cows.

“That’s why it probably doesn’t change your feed bill, in terms of substantially decreasing it, but it sure keeps you from having to increase it just to feed those cows that are thin 30 days before calving season,” he adds.

Despite varying views on actually putting a sustained nutrition program into action, Weaber, Betz and Harr were all in agreement that consistently maintaining a BCS of 5 to 6 is better for the cow, the calf and the wallet.

“Cows are in better condition, so naturally, so are the calves. When you have that going for you, it’s bound to make everything better,” Betz concludes. **HW**