

Body Condition Scoring

A Free and Useful Tool

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Body condition scoring cattle is a freely available management tool that can assist ranchers with improving their economic bottom line. Importantly, body condition scoring provides a quantitative standard for comparing the condition of animals—avoiding such loose terms as ‘fat’, ‘thin’ or ‘medium’.

Body condition scoring is essentially an assessment of how much body fat the animal is carrying. Scores in Canada range from 1 to 5 and a cow can score half-way between any two numbers (ex. BCS=2.5). Body condition scoring must be hands-on, because a thick coat can hide a skinny frame. The body condition score (BCS) is assessed by placing a hand on the loin of an animal, with fingers splayed towards the opposite hip bone (fig 1). With your thumb, feel for any fat cover over the ends of the short ribs. There is no muscle between the ends of the short ribs and the skin, therefore any additional cover felt over the ends of the short ribs is fat.

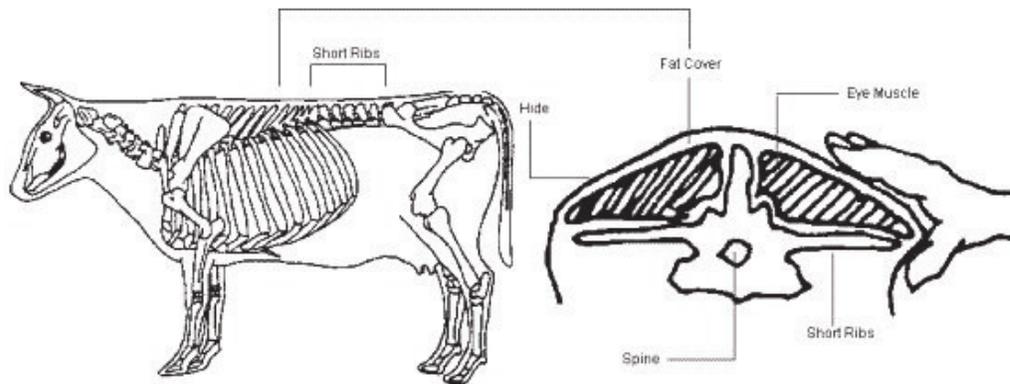


Figure 1—Where to look for body fat.

In cows that score above a 3, the short ribs can no longer be felt. So, in fatter cattle, the fat cover around the tail head and over the ribs is also used to determine the BCS. The Canadian system follows the Scottish system for body condition scoring, which is as follows:

Score 1:

The individual short ribs are fairly sharp to the touch and there is no fat around the tail head. The hip bones, tail head and ribs are visually prominent.

Score 2:

The short ribs can be identified individually when touched, but feel rounded rather than sharp. There is some tissue cover around the tail head, over the hip bones and the flank. Individual ribs are no longer obvious.

Score 3:

The short ribs can only be felt with firm pressure. The areas on either side of the tail head now have a degree of fat cover that can be felt easily.

Score 4:

Fat cover around the tail head is evident as slight "rounds," soft to the touch. The short ribs cannot be felt even with firm pressure. Folds of fat are beginning to develop over the ribs and thighs of the animal.

Score 5:

The bone structure is no longer noticeable, and the animal presents a "blocky" appearance. The tail head and hip bones are almost completely buried in fat, and folds of fat are apparent over the ribs and thighs. The short ribs are completely covered by fat, and the animal's mobility is impaired by the large amounts of fat carried.

REMINDER: Remember to renew your PCBFA membership for 2013 to ensure you continue to receive the monthly newsletters, 2 free feed tests and much more....

Please send \$30 to:
PCBFA
Box 3000
Fairview, AB T0H 1L0

EVENTS

March

Peace Country Classic

March 7-9th
Evergreen Park
Grande Prairie

Stop by our booth to say hello while you take in the bull sale and trade fair!

Shelterbelt Workshop

March 22nd
Worsley Community Hall

Learn all about establishing, maintaining and seed sourcing for your shelterbelt or woodlot. Pre-registration is required.

Call Karlah at 780-523-4033 for more details or to register!

DON'T FORGET!

We have a study tour to Australia planned for November of 2013!! This exciting opportunity is open to members and non-members alike and will feature a host of farm and ag-business tours in addition to essential site-seeing in legendarily beautiful Australia!

Call Morgan at 780-835-6799 for more details or to place your down payment!

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Cows should be assessed three times each production year. It is ideal that the same person score the animals each year, to establish some continuity. Research from Alberta Agriculture has established ideal body condition scores for each of these time periods:

Fall pregnancy check or start of winter feeding program – optimum score is 3.0 for all animals
At calving – optimum score is 2.5 for mature cows; 3.0 for first-calf heifers
30 days before the start of the breeding season – optimum score is 2.5 for all animals.

The most important application of body condition scores is in determining economical feeding regimes which optimize animal fertility. Ideal feeding regimes recognize that a cow needs access to increasing energy levels for maintenance, production (of meat or milk) and reproduction. A BCS that can serve this energy demand is achieved through a feeding schedule that supplies adequate energy at the right time. Here is where the savings come in: essentially, if a cow is fed to lose one-half of a body condition score over the winter (ie start the winter with a BCS of 3), there will be a savings in winter feed costs. This extra one-half of a BCS in the fall provides a insulating layer against the cold and the cow can actually 'give up' some of its extra fat reserves to its own energy requirements over time in a practice known as 'feeding off the back'.

Here are some numbers from Alberta Agriculture: An 1,100 pound cow scoring 2.5 requires between 20-22 pounds of hay for maintenance and reproduction. A 1200 pound cow scoring 3.0 can provide about one-half a pound of energy 'off her back' each day, reducing her feed requirements down to 18-20 pounds of hay per day – a savings of 10 per cent. Compare this to a cow that has to improve body condition by one unit through the winter: assuming she has to be fed 7 pounds of barley or 11 pounds of hay over and above what she requires for maintenance, the winter feed costs of this cow can increase by as much as 50 per cent! **Goodbye trip to Australia in November 2013 and hello delayed retirement.** These savings are even more important in drought years when winter feed is scarce and costly: one study suggests a producer with 150 cows could see a return of over \$25,000 through body condition management in a drought year.

It is estimated that mature cows can gain in excess of 200 lbs (or the equivalent of one unit of BCS) during a normal pasture season. This gain is important, because fat reserves that are harvested in high cost feeding times (the winter) must be replaced during low cost feeding times (abundant summer pasture) in order to be available again in the subsequent winter. In situations where cows are not gaining sufficiently, a herd manager may want to consider creep feeding or even early weaning to provide cows with at least one month of calf-free good fall grazing before winter feeding begins.

Don't be too hard on your girls throughout the winter—that will cost you too! Mature cows should calve with a BCS of no less than 2.5 (3.0 for first-calf heifers) and maintain that condition throughout the breeding season. Otherwise, estrous is delayed and the % of cows catching in the first estrous cycle can be greatly reduced as the cow scrambles to meet the energy requirements of milk production combined with re-establishing it's own body condition. The following year's calf-crop will be younger and lighter at weaning. Assuming that an average calf can gain 2 lbs per day from birth to weaning, for every estrous cycle that a cow remains open, the calf is 20 days younger and 40 lbs lighter at weaning—a situation that complements no cow-calfer's pocket book!

Flushing is the practice of feeding cows a high nutrition diet during the two weeks leading up to the breeding season and during the first 30 days of it. It can be used in situations where a cow is scoring low at spring calving. However, it will only be effective for cows who can achieve the ideal score of 2.5 in time for breeding. Flushing can be costly and the better practice is to ensure cows do not get below a score of 2.5 in the first place. Finally, be forewarned that body condition scoring is only a measure of an animals body fat and does not ensure that a cow has received adequate protein, vitamins and minerals.

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