

Body Condition Scores After Calving

For many of us, the calving season has begun or is right around the corner. The following is based on a publication from Stephen Boyles, OSU Beef Specialist.

Most reproductive failures in beef cattle can be attributed to improper nutrition and thin body condition. Monitor the effectiveness of the nutrition program in the long-term by herd performance records but in the short-term, by keeping an eye on the flesh or body condition score (BCS) of the cows. The cow's priorities for nutrition are maintenance, lactation, growth (young females), and reproduction. Consequently, reproduction is the first to go and the last to return in cases of inadequate nutrition. The nutrition level pre- and post-calving affects the conception rate of the subsequent breeding seasons. Cows that are thin before calving will have a delayed onset of estrus. Thin cows after calving will have reduced conception rates. Obesity is a problem in heifers that become fat during the growing phase. Fat heifers normally have lower-than-average reproductive rates. It is less serious in mature cows. However, obesity is uneconomical since fat cows are more expensive to maintain.

Body condition at calving is the most critical factor in determining reproductive performance. High pregnancy rates will not occur in first-calf heifers unless they can gain some fat cover during the breeding period. This can be difficult to do for young stock with calves at the side. Thin cows need to increase body condition and moderate condition cows need to maintain body condition. Correcting deficiencies before calving is easier and cheaper.

BCS 4: If a cow is BCS 4 or thinner, she will be slow to return to heat and may not rebreed on time. Feeding a high level of nutrition after calving can sometimes shorten the postpartum interval from calving to first heat in thin cows (BCS 3-4), but the postpartum interval will usually be longer than if the cows had calved in good condition (BCS 6-7). Therefore, early weaning of the calf at 50 days of age or at the start of the breeding season may have to be considered. Manage these cows with those in the BCS 6 group. The calves can be raised on self-feeders using an early weaning ration. The cows, even if quite thin, should return to estrus within three weeks after weaning and will thus rebreed to have a calf next year. It is far easier and cheaper to make cows gain weight before calving than after calving when the added requirement of lactation is present. A parasite evaluation is certainly merited.

BCS 5: If a cow is a BCS 5, continue to feed hay or grain and protein supplements to ensure she does not lose condition before the breeding season. Many cows calve at condition scores less than 5 and still have excellent rebreeding rates when weather and nutrition conditions do not cause extraordinary stress during this critical period (two months before calving through the breeding season). A borderline 4-5 BCS cow that is exposed to severe environmental stress may require the calf to be removed for 48 hours, 10 days before the breeding season. This should help a stressed BCS 5 cow to return to heat and rebreed on schedule. This program will probably not work with very thin cows. The calves should be offered palatable feed and plenty of water while separated from their dams.

BCS 6: If she is a BCS 6 (or even fatter), continue with normal management and feeding. While good body condition at calving time is an indication that rebreeding should proceed without difficulty, good condition at calving does not guarantee acceptable rebreeding performance. Cows losing condition after calving have lower conception rates than do cows maintaining condition.

Body Conditioning Scoring System for Beef Cattle Descriptions for #3-6:

3. THIN: Poor milk production and reproduction. Ribs are still individually identifiable but not quite as sharp to the touch. Obvious palpable fat along the spine and over the tail-head with some tissue over the top portion of the ribs.
4. BORDERLINE: Reproduction bordering on inadequate. Individual ribs are no longer visually obvious. Individual spines can be identified on palpation but feel rounded rather than sharp—some fat covers over ribs and hip bones.
5. MODERATE: Minimum necessary for efficient rebreeding and good milk, production. The cow has a generally good overall appearance. Upon palpation, the fat cover over the ribs feels spongy and the area on either side of the tail-head now has a palpable fat cover.
6. OPTIMUM: Milk production and rebreeding are very acceptable. Firm pressure now has to be applied to feel spinous processes. A high degree of fat is palpable over the ribs and around the tail-head.

Upcoming Programs

February 13th - Intro to Garden Planning & Starting Seeds Indoors. This free beginner gardening program will be held at the Adams County Fairgrounds from 6:00-8:00 pm. Please call the extension office at 937-544-2339 to register.

February 20th- GAP Training for Tobacco Producers. This training is from 9:00-11:00 am at Raines Farm and Greenhouses. If you plan on attending, please contact the office to register.

February 21- Weeds University at the Clermont County Fairgrounds from 9:00-4:00 pm. They are designed to keep agronomic producers on the cutting edge in weed control for their cropping operations. Topics addressed will include hot topics in weed control, local weed issues, biology, identification of weeds, control strategies, and evaluating herbicides. Hands-on exercises will be included. To register go to <http://go.osu.edu/24WeedsUniv> or call (513) 732-7070. The cost for this program is \$40 and includes lunch and educational materials.

March 1st- Cow Calf School at Raines Farm. The focus will be on optimizing herd fertility. The cost to register is \$10.00. This workshop is from 9:00-2:30 pm. Presentation topics include breeding season management, cow longevity, and culling decisions, EPDs in action, synchronization strategies, and bull evaluation. Contact the extension office to register or for any additional information.

March 5th- Farm and Family Night at the Maysville Community and Technical College. This free event is from 6:00-9:00 pm, with dinner starting at 4:30. We do not have tickets at the office yet, so stay tuned for more info!

March 19th- Backyard Composting for Beginners Workshop from 6:00-8:00 pm at the Adams County Fairgrounds. Call or email me to register for this free gardening workshop.