Bayou BEEF TIPS
LSU AgCenter Research & Extension

Beef Cattle Body Condition

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INTRODUCTION

For many years, most beef cattle producers have observed the body fat reserves of their cattle herd and used that information to make feeding and nutritional decisions. Research shows that proper nutrition and efficient use of forage reduces costs. In today's beef cattle industry, many producers monitor the effectiveness of their nutritional programs by using body condition scoring. Body condition scoring allows the producer to be more precise in the description of their cattle and provides a uniform system for the beef industry to use when monitoring the energy reserves of the beef herd. Body condition scoring allows producers to sort cattle according to their nutritional requirements. It provides a means for the cattleman to evaluate the nutritional program each time the cattle are observed. When cattle condition is evaluated at different times of the year, it enables the producer to more efficiently use available forages and incorporate that use into the overall nutritional program in order to reduce supplemental feed and hay to a minimum. When producers better understand the relationship of body condition scores and rebreeding efficiency, they will have a powerful tool to make better management decisions.

WHAT ARE BODY CONDITION SCORES?

Researchers and the cattle industry in the United States use a nine grade system for body condition scoring with a score of 9 being the fattest and 1 being the thinnest. Body condition scores are numbers used to measure the relative body composition or the amount of fat on cattle. A very thin cow appears extremely angular and sharp. A fat cow appears smooth with most bone structure not noticeable visually or by feel. The primary areas to visually appraise a beef cow for body condition score are to determine how many ribs are actually showing from the last half of the rib cage. If more than two ribs are easily observed, the cow will score lower than five. Also, visually appraise the back along the loin in front of the hook bones. If vertebrae are visually observed, the cow will probably score 4 or lower.

BODY CONDITION SCORES

Score 1: Cattle are severely emaciated. Bone structure of shoulder, ribs, back, hooks and pins are sharp to the touch and easily visible. There is little or no evidence of fat deposits or muscling. Cattle with this score are extremely rare and are usually diseased.

Score 2: Cattle are emaciated. There is little evidence of fat deposition but some muscling in the hindquarters. The backbone is still sharp.

Score 3: Cattle are very thin. There is no fat on ribs or brisket. Some muscle may be visible. The backbone is easily visible.

Score 4: Cattle are thin. The ribs are easily visible but the shoulders and hindquarters show fair muscling. The backbone is visible.

Score 5: The cattle are moderate to thin. The last two or three ribs can not be seen unless the cow has been shrunk. There is little evidence of fat in the brisket, over the ribs or around the tailhead.

Score 6: The cattle are smooth appearing throughout their body. There are some fat deposits in the brisket and over the tailhead. The ribs are covered and the back appears rounded.

Score 7: The cattle are in very good flesh. The brisket is full. The fat cover is thick and patchiness is likely. The ribs are very smooth.

Score 8: The cattle are fat. The back is very square. The brisket is distended. There are heavy fat pockets around the tailhead.

Score 9: This condition is rarely observed. The cattle are very fat and the animal's mobility may actually be impaired by excessive fat.

WHY IS BODY CONDITION IMPORTANT?

One of the primary problems in improving beef cattle reproductive efficiency is the duration of post-calving anestrous period (no estrous cycle). Nature dictates a specific priority for the utilization of nutrients by cattle. Body maintenance comes first, followed by lactation and growth, with reproduction last. Reproduction only occurs during periods of nutrient adequacy. During times of nutrient deprivation, reproductive performance is the first to suffer and the last to recover. If cattle are to maintain a calving interval of one year, they must conceive within 80-85 days after calving. Body condition at calving determines to a great extent the rebreeding performance of beef cattle in the ensuing breeding season. Cows should have a body condition score of 5 to 6, and first calf heifers should have a body condition score of 6 at calving time. It is very expensive and very difficult to regain body condition after calving and still achieve an acceptable rebreeding percentage.

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