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What Condition Are Your Cows In?

Wouldn't it be nice if there was a standardized method to gauge the condition of cattle? Or any animal species for that matter? Well, folks, let me tell you about the Body Condition Scoring Method. This assessment of relative fatness is a scale from one to nine. A score of one is an animal that is emaciated; has every rib showing. And a score of nine is roly poly fat, with large pones at the tailhead. This is an excellent and free tool to appraise nutritional needs. I recommend taking mental note of condition every time you lay eyes on your livestock. But make a physical note, in a record book at the same time each year, like 60 to 90 days before calving, at calving or at weaning.

There are several key places to assess body condition in beef cattle. Overall body fat should be gauged, along with fat cover over the tailhead, ribs, shoulder and brisket. Visible and palpable bone structure is another essential part of body condition scoring and includes the ribs, backbone, spinous processes, transverse processes, hooks (hips) and pins. Physically running your hand over the ribs, along the backbone and tailhead may assist in assigning a score. Fat will be spongy while bone structure with little or no fat cover will feel sharp to the touch. Palpation of body condition is particularly beneficial when loose hide or a thick hair coat makes visual appraisal difficult. Muscling should be evaluated to determine if it has been broken down for energy. This occurs when cattle reach the low end of the body condition scoring scale. You can gauge muscling by the roundness of the thigh. Don't be fooled by long hair, gestation stage or rumen fill.

The goal for cows is a score of five at calving. A cow with a score of five will not have visible spine bumps or ribs, but you'll see the hooks and pins are visible. There will be some fat in the brisket area and her muscling will be full. Scores below five and above six can lead to rebreeding problems after birthing. Additionally, malnutrition during gestation can lead to fetal problems and affect milk production. Nutrition becomes even more crucial with young females.

The males in each species should also be evaluated. Bulls need to be scoring a 5.5 to 6.5 at the start of the breeding season. Undernourished sires will be less active. On the other hand, over nourished sires can exhibit poor service quality depending on the fat thickness in the reproductive system.

Remember to keep it simple and consistent. You will likely gauge your livestock slightly differently than you neighbor, so be sure to do your own work!

Looking at herd or flock body condition averages is a visual representation of how your nutritional program effects your livestock. Observing individual body condition scores allows you to sort animals with similar nutritional needs into management groups, or even to identify animals that should be culled because they don't fit your environment. Also, you can use these scores to know when it's time to wean, or other management events, rather than with a calendar.

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