



# LIVESTOCK AND NATURAL RESOURCES



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## BODY CONDITION SCORING

Body Condition scores are used to suggest the relative fatness of the animal. Most published reports use a range of one to nine, with a score of one representing very thin body condition and nine extreme fatness.

Scoring systems have been developed for cattle, sheep, and horses. A scoring system for cattle with pictures is included on page 6.

When a cow is assigned a body condition score, we have just given an estimate of the fat content of the animal (*see graph below right*). Body conditions score nine means the animals has 40% fat, while a score three translates to 13.7% fat.

Changes in body condition are a more reliable guide for evaluating the nutritional status of the cow than changes in live weights. Many variables enter into the weighing of live cattle — time of day, distance from scales, forage quantity, gut fill, and quality of forage to name a few.



### Why Do It?

Profitability in the cow-calf business is influenced by the percentage of cows in the herd which consistently calve every 12 months. The single most important factor in getting a cow to breed after calving is her BODY CONDITION SCORE AT THE TIME OF CALVING.

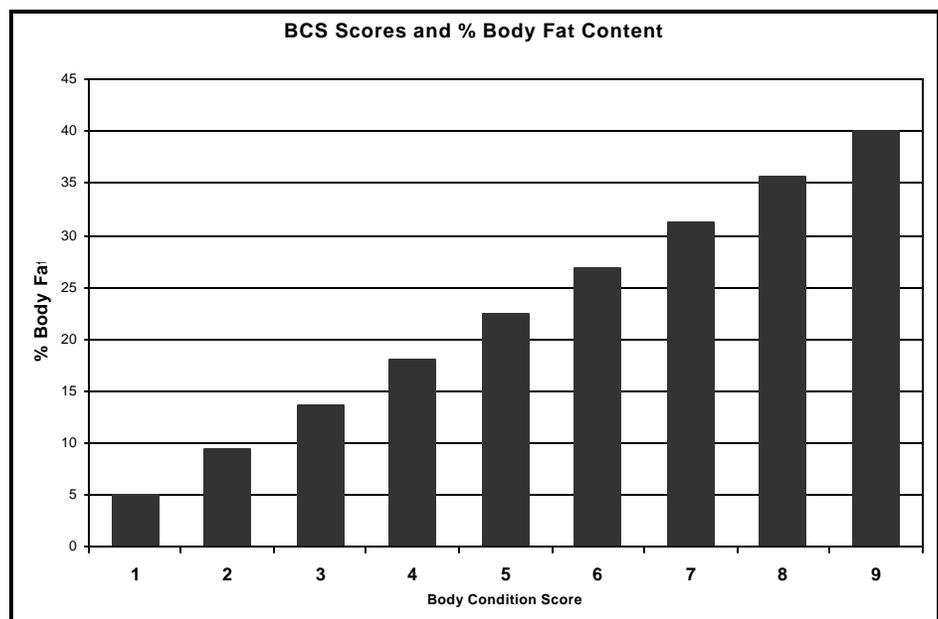
The two tables on the following page illustrate the impact cow condition can have on the post partum interval (*number of days between calving and first estrus — shorter is better than longer*) and subsequent pregnancy rates.

There are numerous

studies that parallel the results shown in these tables. Cows in good condition at calving stand a much higher chance of producing a calf for you every year than thin cows. You should make it a priority to learn how to body condition score your herd.

### How Do I Do It?

There is a tremendous amount of information about the importance of body condition scoring and pictures or video of example animals. However, comparatively little information exists about the mechanics of actually scoring.



One question that comes up is whether there is a need a to feel the cows. I would highly recommend doing this because long hair can fool you and cows will differ sometimes as to the way they carry their fat.

Once you are comfortable with the process, it will help your eye make a more educated guess if you are doing a visual appraisal only.

On the research project

site, we body condition score every month and have 29 months of data. While it may not be realistic for you to score every month, there will be times during the year it will be feasible. Some examples would include vaccination or worming time, branding, pregnancy checking, and just before the start of calving. The key point is to just start doing it!



<b>Effect of Body Condition at Calving on Post Partum Interval</b>			
<b>(% Cycling By)</b>			
BODY CONDITION	50 DAYS*	70 DAYS*	90 DAYS*
Thin (BCS 1-3)	34	55	66
Moderate (BCS 4-6)	45	79	92
Fat (BCS 7-9)	42	96	100

### Methods

Scoring of the cow starts with putting your hands on them, so you will need a squeeze chute or scale to do this. Dave Pratt has come up with a method that has proven extremely helpful by placing his hand just behind the shoulder and down about a hand length from the backbone (*see photo top right*).

This point is what I refer to as "the sweet spot" of the cow. Pushing in slightly with the palm of your hand will give you a good idea as to the sponginess or hardness of the cow. Spongy feeling cows will have more fat cover, while hard feeling ones have less.

Another important is located at the tailhead (*see photo bottom right*). If you are starting to see fat deposits at the tailhead area, it can be a good indicator that the cow is getting into BCS 6 territory. Using the sweet spot, the tailhead, and becoming familiar with the descriptions for different BCS scores listed on the next page, can help

your accuracy in determining scores.

I would recommend having one other person score with you. This gives you a comparison and you can learn from each other. If you are unsure about giving a score, turn the cow loose and watch her walk. Sometimes this can clarify what score to give.

### Calibration

I also highly recommend getting calibrated. I struggle more in initially scoring cows than Dave does.

Once I get my hands on a cow that I know is a certain score (*reference cow*), it makes it much easier to score the rest of the herd with confidence.

(Continued on page 4)

<b>Relationship of Body Condition Score at Calving to Subsequent Pregnancy Rate, 3 Studies</b>			
BODY CONDITION SCORE	STUDY A	STUDY B	STUDY C
BCS 4	50	17	59
BCS 5	81	67	67
BCS 6	88	80	87
BCS 7	90	—	—

## DESCRIPTION OF BODY CONDITION SCORES

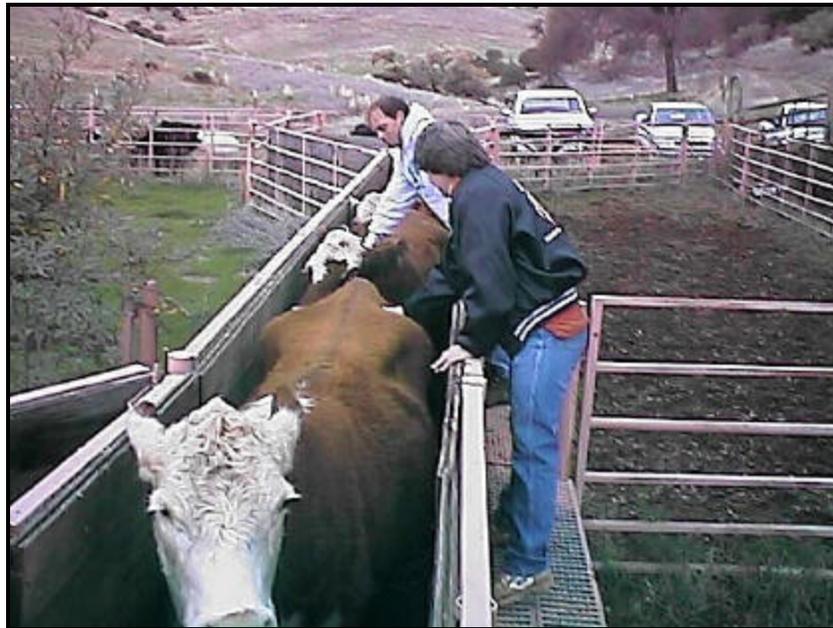
BCS	DESCRIPTION		
Thin Condition	1	Bone structure of shoulder, ribs, back, hooks and pins sharp to touch and easily visible. Little evidence of fat deposits or muscling.	 <p><b>Body Condition Score 3</b></p>
	2	Little evidence of fat deposition but some muscling in hindquarters. The spinous processes feel sharp to touch and are easily seen with spaces between them.	
	3	Beginning of fat cover over the loin, back and foreribs. Backbone still highly visible. Processes of the spine can be identified individually by touch and may still be visible. Spaces between the processes are less pronounced.	
Borderline Condition	4	Foreribs not noticeable; 12th and 13th ribs still noticeable to the eye particularly in cattle with a big spring of rib and ribs wide apart. The transverse spinous processes can be identified only by palpation ( <i>with slight pressure</i> ) to feel rounded rather than sharp. Full but straightness of muscling in the hindquarters.	 <p><b>Body Condition Score 5</b></p>
Optimum Condition	5	12th and 13th ribs not visible to the eye unless the animal has been shrunk. The transverse spinous processes can only be felt with firm pressure to feel rounded — not noticeable to the eye. Spaces between the processes not visible and only distinguishable with firm pressure. Areas on each side of tail head are fairly well filled but not mounded.	 <p><b>Body Condition Score 6</b></p>
	6	Ribs fully covered, not noticeable to the eye. Hindquarters plump and full. Noticeable sponginess to covering of foreribs and on each side of the tail head. Firm pressure now required to feel transverse processes.	
Fat Condition	7	Ends of the spinous processes can only be felt with very firm pressure. Spaces between processes can barely be distinguished at all. Abundant fat cover on either side of tail head with some patchiness evidence.	 <p><b>Body Condition Score 8</b></p>
	8	Animal taking on a smooth, blocky appearance; bone structure disappearing from sight. Fat cover thick and spongy with patchiness likely.	
	9	Bone structure not seen or easily felt. Tail head buried in fat. Animal's mobility may actually be impaired by excess amount of fat.	

From B-1526, *Body Condition, Nutrition and Reproduction of Beef Cows*, TXAMU — Herd/Sprott

Calibration can be done by running a few head through and scoring them. Then bring these same cows back and score them again to see how close the two scores agree. I have also found it helpful to walk along the catwalk by the lead up alley (see photo to right) and score the cows. This makes it easier to find that reference cow and make quick comparisons between animals.

### Where Can I Practice?

You are always welcome at the project site to practice scoring our cows. We usually body condition score and weigh the cows sometime between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of every month. You can call me to see when the next date will be.



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