



Maintaining Proper Body Condition Score

Beneficial Categories



Background

Body condition scoring (BCS) is a hands-on, subjective method to determine the amount of fat cover cattle have. It is more accurate than solely observing the animal to determine fat cover. Fat cover is important to monitor because excess or minimal fat cover can have detrimental effects on the health, welfare and reproductive productivity of the cows. Cattle are expected to produce a calf every 365 days. A cow's energy reserves go to body maintenance, then growth, and lastly reproduction. If a cow is underconditioned after calving she will not have enough energy reserves to support her general maintenance, supply her calf with milk, repair her reproductive tract, and come back into heat to be rebred on time.

Canadian winters are also a factor in a cow's energy reserves, as typically cows are in later stage pregnancy during cold winter months requiring extra energy reserves to stay warm. Ensuring a cow has adequate energy reserves and body condition to support her and her calf is essential. During winter, feed costs are the highest expense for Canadian producers. Checking the condition of the herd before winter feeding begins can ensure cattle that are overconditioned are managed separately to prevent overfeeding and avoid unnecessary feed costs.

BCS is a valuable, inexpensive and easy tool to help evaluate cattle health and potential nutritional requirements. There are two scales used to measure BCS. The Canadian Angus Association uses the 1–9 scale that is also used in the United States. There is also a 1–5 scale commonly used in Canada. Below is a comparison of those scales.

	CAA/USA Scale	1–5 Scale
Underconditioned	1	1
	2	1.5
	3	2
Optimum	4	2.5
	5	3
	6	3.5
Overconditioned	7	4
	8	4.5

	9	5
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The benefits of monitoring cow condition and ensuring it remains optimal based on stage of production include:

- Rebreeding (up to 30 days) sooner
- Increased pregnancy rates
- Improved milk production
- Healthier calves
- Decreased calving issues

BCS is determined by feeling for the cover of muscle and fat over specific landmarks on the body such as the spine, short ribs, hooks and pins, and tail heads.

For descriptions of each score on the 1–9 BCS scale, [click here](#).

[The beef codes of practice](#) have images to assist with taking BCS. Please note these images use the 1–5 scale.

The Beef Cattle Research Council has [a video on managing and taking BCS](#) that is also based on the 1–5 scale.

Optimal Times for Body Condition Scoring

Please note: for Canadian Angus Association members, mature cow BCS should be recorded and submitted along with mature cow weight, mature docility, mature hip height, mature claw set, and mature hip angle. All these traits should be collected within +/- 45 days of calf weaning weight collection date.

Ideally, BCS would be collected at least three times a year to ensure individual cattle can be identified and properly managed to adjust or maintain their BCS. Depending on the animal’s stage of production, there are different BCS targets. The table below states the ideal times to collect BCS and the target BCS based on cattle type for spring calving herds.

Stage of Production	Target BCS (Scale 1–9)		Target BCS (Scale 1–5)	
30 days before the start of breeding	Cows	4	Cows	2.5
	Heifers	5	Heifers	3.0
	Bulls	5-6	Bulls	3.0-3.5
Pregnancy checking or before the start of winter feeding program	Cows & Heifers	5	Cows & Heifers	3.0
	Bulls	5-6	Bulls	3.0-3.5
Calving	Mature cows	4	Mature cows	2.5
	Bred & first-calf heifers	5	Bred & first-calf heifers	3.0

Adapted from the Government of Alberta Beef Fact Sheet

A simple way to begin including BCS in your management practices would be to take advantage of times the cattle are being handled or run through the chute. During pregnancy check is a good time to score heifers and cows to ensure that any overly thin animals can be identified and managed to increase their BCS. Cow maintenance requirements increase up to 40 percent more during the winter and late gestation, so it is important to ensure they have enough energy reserves to succeed through winter and calving.

Animals identified as being thinner or overconditioned should be sorted from the group and managed separately to ensure they are provided the nutrients required to return to an ideal BCS.

Potential Economic Costs/Benefits

Both over and underconditioned animals can reduce profitability on an operation. Maintaining ideal condition in your herd can optimize potential profitability and minimize risk of revenue loss.

	Underconditioned Cow	Overconditioned Cow
Potential revenue losses	Decreased weaning weights (up to 42 lbs per calf)	Decreased milk production
	Increased post-partum interval	Decreased calf performance
	Decreased pregnancy rates	
Additional costs	Decreased calf immunity	Increased calving difficulties
		Higher feeding costs

**Adapted from BCRC*

There is no additional cost associated with adopting body condition scoring into a management system. Checking and maintaining proper body condition in a cow herd can prevent potential lost revenue in the calf crop and limit additional costs such as drugs or veterinary costs. Specific value of increased calf weaning weight or feed costs will vary depending on region and year, but providing cattle with the best opportunity to thrive will limit overall economic loss.

For a feed cost calculator and a weaned calf value based on BCS [visit BCRC](#).

Financial Incentives

There are no current financial incentives for adopting body condition scoring.

For more information on benefits of BCS and how to collect data, consult with your veterinarian, local government agricultural extension specialist, or visit one of the sites below:

[Canadian Beef Codes of practice](#)

[Canadian Angus Association Data Collection Guide](#)

[Government of Alberta Beef Cow BCS Guide](#)

[Beef Cattle Research Council](#)

[Reproductive Issues with Over and Underconditioned Cows \(BCRC\)](#)

[American Angus Association Body Condition Scoring Guidelines](#)