Range Beef Cow Symposium XX

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The Basics of Scoring Body Condition

Monitoring a cow's body condition score remains an economical and effective way to boost reproductive performance.

by ***Kindra Gordon***

FORT COLLINS, Colo. (Dec. 12, 2007) — Want a historical perspective of how a cow herd has been managed? Take an inventory of cow body condition scores (BCS), says South Dakota State University's Julie Walker.

"Body condition scoring is an effective management tool to estimate the energy reserves of a cow," Walker said during her remarks Dec. 11 at the 2007 Range Beef Cow Symposium in Fort Collins, Colo. The symposium is hosted by the cooperative extension services and animal science departments of Colorado State University, South Dakota State University, the University of Wyoming and the University of Nebraska.

Walker added that monitoring BCS is a tool that doesn't cost producers anything to use since it doesn't require any equipment, just a trained eye. It can be an important tool for ensuring that cows breed back annually.

"We've heard that the more uniform a set of calves, the better prices they bring," Walker said. To get uniform calf weaning weights, producers are aiming to have calves born in a 45- to 60-day time period, which means cows must be bred during a 45- to 60-day breeding season, she explained.

For cows to have a short postpartum interval (the length of time from parturition until the first estrus), research has shown that a BCS 5-6 at calving is necessary. Walker cited research that has shown if cows are in BCS 3 at calving, only an average of 43% will breed back. Additional research shows that a BCS 7 may yield a high breed-back percentage. But, Walker questioned, "What did it cost to get that?"

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►Julie Walker

Thus, the moderate BCS 5-6 is typically recommended. South Dakota research has found that early-calving cows can be slightly thinner than late-calving cows because they have additional time to initiate estrous cycles prior to the breeding season.

Walker provided a quick review of the 1-to-9 scoring system used for estimating cow BCS. A 3 means the upper skeletal structures, including the ribs and spine, are visible. A 5 has the last two ribs slightly visible with the tailhead filled, but not mounded by fat. A 7 would have the "finished steer" look, according to Walker, with fat around the tailhead, in the brisket and possibly in the udder as well.

In closing, Walker cited new research done at New Mexico State University that has looked at young cows with a BCS lower than 5. By supplementing glucogenic precursors to these cows, the ranch managers have been able to maintain a 90%-plus fall pregnancy rate within a 60-day or less breeding season.

Walker concluded that this research may provide some valuable management options for managing thin cows that are not at their optimum BCS, but additional trials need to be conducted to see if this research is applicable in the Northern Plains.

Walker reiterated the importance of monitoring BCS in the herd, and she added that early evaluation is essential so that management changes can be made to approach calving season with cows at an appropriate BCS that translates into a successful breeding season.

For more information about how to score body condition, visit *www.cowbcs.com.*

Editor's Note: *Additional coverage of the Range Beef Cow Symposium XX is available at* www.rangebeefcow.com. *API coverage of the symposium is made available for distribution to all media via an agreement with the Range Beef Cow Symposium Committee and API. Headquartered in Saint Joseph, Mo., API publishes the* Angus Journal *and the* Angus Beef Bulletin, *as well as providing online coverage of events and topics pertinent to cattlemen.*