Thin Cows or Fat Cows - Which is Better?

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The calves are weaned. The steers have filled the pre-conditioning pens. The heifers are awaiting transportation to crop aftermath and standing corn. The cows are giving up control of their calves. The cows, while actively gobbling up whatever crop aftermath and standing corn they can reach, are scheduled for their final evaluation--keep or cull--during the last week of November.

Excess cows need to be processed in time to make the bred cow sales, and cull cows simply need to move into the marketing channel.

The North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center does not feed cattle long term, and cull cows coming off standing corn would receive little benefit from a stay in the feedlot. This is also the time the cows are treated for external parasites. The cows are weighed, pregnancy verified and treated. Upon leaving the chute, the cows are sorted by condition score and penned accordingly for the winter.

Although there may be many ways to manage cows, if I were to pick one management practice above the others, I would choose sorting cows. The boss cow syndrome is very real. Cows in poor condition at the beginning of winter have virtually no opportunity to compete with better-conditioned, stronger cows once the snow flies, the temperature dips and the belly starts filling with a rapidly growing calf.

I prefer to stick with hard data; however, I am not sure all the data is in when handling cows in preparation for winter. There is a raft of unanswered questions. Generally, cows that go into the winter in good condition have a much better chance of coming out of the winter in good condition. Similarly, if a cow can be supplied with her nutrient needs daily, she only needs to be kept in average condition and should stay in average condition.

In the cow world, a real dilemma exists between meeting daily needs versus the need for the cow to store up fat for those days when daily nutrient needs cannot be met. How many producers can guarantee daily nutrient needs?

At the Center, we canít meet that requirement, so the question becomes how often can we, and how much fat should a cow store to glide over the days when nutrition is not adequate. If a cow loses one condition score, the bottom line impact is really dependent on the condition she was in to begin with.

Ultimately, the crisis for poorly conditioned cows hits home when peak nutritional demands arrive when the calf is born and the cow begins lactation. Now the cow needs to work, and unfortunately, the ability to separate thin cows from the whole herd generally quickly diminishes as the calving season progresses.

The boss cow is still the boss, and with a new baby by her side, the odds of the thin cow ever catching up are slim to none. So how much should a cow gain in the fall?

Following the discussion of utilizing cows as corn choppers, Chip Poland, the Centerís nutritionist, noted, "Calculating the advantage or disadvantage of 191 pounds of gain and 2.5 units of body condition will need to wait for another day."

Obviously, 2.5 units of body condition seems excessive for efficient utilization of standing corn; however, we are still probing for the right amount with hopes of balancing the right amount of condition with the effective use of a less labor-intensive system of beef production. For now, the target still remains standing: How do we obtain moderate to good condition of all the cows without having any too thin or too fat? No one ever said moving targets were easy to hit. May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at *www.BeefTalk.com*. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to *www.CHAPS2000.com* on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0117.

Cow Body Condition Scores

Condition Score	Description
Thin	
1	Severely emaciated. Weak with no palpable fat.
2	Emaciated but not weak.
3	Very thin with prominent ribs, pin bones visible.
Moderate	
4	Thin with individual muscles, ribs and pin bones visible.
5	Moderate condition with ribs and muscles less apparent.
6	Good, with a smooth appearance throughout.
Fat	
7	Very good, with a full brisket and evidence of fat throughout.
8	Obese, with distended fat deposits.
9	Very obese fat.

Adapted from Wagner, Oklahoma State University, MP-117