

Sort Young, Thin Cows Before Winter Arrives

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Many factors influence management of the cow herd when environmental stress hits. Summer heat and the lack of moisture is now the major focus for producers in the region.

To the cow, the long hot days of summer are probably a marginal trade off for the short cold days of winter. Either way, we need to remind ourselves that cows are always in a state of transition. They gain a little and lose a little. If they gain a lot, the cows are happy but our pocket book probably isn't. If they lose a lot, everyone is sad.

In a general sense, cattle producers often talk about the herd, but in reality the herd is made up of several groups of cows that have different needs. Younger cows (two- and three-year-olds) should be managed separately when feed supplies are limited. Although these cows are smaller than mature cows, they must consume the same amount of feed as the older cows to continue growing and reproducing at the same time. They should be separated, along with thin older cows, to provide adequate feed intake.

The younger cows are also going to be influenced by the older cows' behavior. Although not territorial, older cows will certainly influence and position the younger cows as needed. Although older cows and younger cows have different needs, the overall status of all the cows regardless of age needs to be monitored. The best way to gauge the nutritional status of the cow herd is to monitor cow condition using the following guidelines.

- ∑ Thin cows. These are severely emaciated with all ribs and bone structure easily visible, physically weak and some muscle still visible. At least in North Dakota, even when feed is short, very few cows actually fall into the thin category.
- ∑ Moderately conditioned cows. These more desirable cows are still thin, with ribs easily visible, but shoulders and hindquarters still show fair muscling to a good smooth appearance throughout with some fat in the brisket and over the tail head and ribs. These cows are common across the Midwest.

- ∑ Excessively conditioned cows. These are in very good flesh, brisket full, tail head showing pockets of fat, back appears square due to fat, and ribs very smooth to obese.

How does your herd stack up? Often, condition scoring is used in the winter months prior to breeding to evaluate the nutritional status of the herd. But summer ñ particularly a dry summer ñ is a good time to start eyeing cows' condition.

Most reproductive failures can be traced back to poor nutrition, regardless of summer or winter shortages. Cow that are thin before calving will have a delayed estrus. When pasture is short and they remain thin during early lactation they will have reduced conception rates. Forty-five day breeding seasons are relatively unsuccessful, and cannot be maintained with thin cows. The percentage of open or late-calving cows will be excessive. Don't manage the herd as one large conglomerate of cows. Actively go on the lookout for thin cows and initiate management plans specifically targeted to the thin cows. Extra feed to moderate or excessively conditioned cows is fruitless, particularly when hay is short.

In closing, try to make a negative situation positive. Don't be afraid to leave the bulls out longer (in North Dakota, Aug. 4 is a good day to pull bulls) than normal and recapture some value by selling pregnant cows, not cull cows. Many producers are moving calving seasons back, so some of those later-bred cows still have value as a productive cow. But remember: Healthy, pregnant thin cows will gain weight once feed arrives. Do not overreact. 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 BT0101.



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