

you are here: [home](#) → [columns](#) → [beef talk](#) → [beef talk: scoring cows helps cattle management](#)

navigation

Links

- [News Home](#)
- [Columns](#)
- [Archives](#)

Feeds

- All News
- BeefTalk
- Dairy Focus
- Prairie Fare
- Economics
- Renewable Accounts
- Small-business Savvy

Twitter

- On Twitter follow [NDSU Ag News](#)

BeefTalk: Scoring Cows Helps Cattle Management

Scoring can help you decide which cows stay and which get sold.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

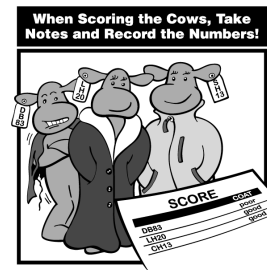
NDSU Extension Service

The concept of scoring various traits for cattle is common.

Recently, I had the opportunity to udder score a set of 82 first-calf heifers after they weaned their calves. The process was not very difficult.

The new Beef Improvement Federation Guidelines (<http://tinyurl.com/BIFGuidelines>) provide ample explanations and diagrams as to how to score the udder suspension and teat size: "Udder and teat quality are among the most important functional traits of beef females. Udder suspension and teat

Images



When Scoring the Cows, Take Notes and Record the Numbers!

columns

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traits of deer females. Udder suspension and teat size scores are numerical values that reflect differences in udder and teat quality. Udder suspension scores are subjective assessments of udder support and range from 9 (very tight) to 1 (very pendulous). Teat size scores are subjective assessments of teat length and circumference and range from 9 (very small) to 1 (very large)."

As with all subjective scores, the person doing the scoring will vary the range of scores, but generally, the recording of the relative difference within the trait being evaluated is noteworthy. The Dickinson Research Extension Center has not evaluated cows regularly for pendulous udders and large teats, which shorten the productive life of a cow.

However, the switch to May calving limited chute and ease of pen accessibility, and large, pendulous udders and teats that were difficult for a newborn calf to nurse are not acceptable. Generally, the calf will nurse a quarter or two and the un-nursed quarters dry up or become problematic.

As with any scoring system, begin by looking at your cattle to see differences. As I walked through the young cows, I saw udders were good today. However, I saw some that caused me to ponder just how long they will hold up.

After the initial walk-through and becoming comfortable with the amount of variation present in the heifers, I scored them. The average score was 8 for udder suspension and 7.8 for teat size,

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perhaps typical of young cows weaning their first calves. Nine heifers had the makings of a pendulous udder (score 7), three heifers had significantly larger teats (score 6) and 14 heifers had large teats (score 7).

So what does this mean? A point: If one does not record the scores today, the answer never will be known.

Today, all the first-calf heifers had sound udders. With time, the heifers will mature slowly and each udder will do the same. I already could see in those lower-scoring heifers the beginning of a challenge.

A bigger point: Had I not written down the udder scores, I would have no record of those heifers. The udder score may become important if the feed supply changes and the center has a need to reduce cow numbers. As difficult as selling a pregnant cow is, cows with potential problematic udders would be candidates for the market cow list.

While I reviewed the udders, I also noticed the variation in the quantity and quality of the cows' hair coat to combat the cold and harsh winter. Some first-calf heifers had good, solid hair coats and some did not. I regret not scoring the hair coat because hair condition is an indication of animal health.

Efforts at finding comfort and lowering stress

directly relate to how a cow or calf is clothed to meet the demands of the environment. Obviously, hair in cold climates is important. Now is the time to observe the hair coat.

I made repeated trips to the pickup to try to warm up while doing the udder scores; however, the cows did not seem to mind. They simply ate and eventually laid down. In northern climates, we all can appreciate those days when everything is covered with frost.

Well-fed cattle produce a lot of heat, particularly when fed high-roughage feedstuffs. As the weather gets colder, the frost eventually will settle on their backs, and those well-insulated cows will look like walking frost balls. The body is well-protected from the devastating cold that can confront us all.

Inside, underneath that winter hair coat, is a very warm, comfortable cow that really is not stressed by the cold. She does not need to depend on constant eating, but rather, eats what she needs and returns to a protected, comfortable spot on the range and quietly ruminates and waits for the warm days of spring.

Contrast that to thin, poor-conditioned cattle that have not developed a good hair coat. They are not comfortable; they are stressed and they are forced to eat more feed to maintain their body temperature.

Well, I should have scored the hair. Data not recorded are knowledge left behind.

Now would be a good time to look at your cattle and evaluate hair coats. Add those with poor hair coats to the list of potential high-input cattle to sell if the need arises.

Even more important would be to body condition score the cows and sort the thinner cows off for some extra feed. Keep warm.

May you find all your ear tags.


For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or [✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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Attachments



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