

BeefTalk: Evaluate Hay Inventory and Cow Condition

Monitoring cow body condition is critical for staying on top of herd management.

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Good cow body condition is the precursor for a successful calving and rebreeding season.

This year's discussion actually started prior to bull turnout last year. Maintaining good cow condition is an ongoing, year-round discussion requiring input based on yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Some of the facts we know, and we only can speculate about some others. But either way, the discussion gets serious at the start of the cow's second trimester of pregnancy.

This year, the question is even more sinister because last year's dryness has forced producers to look critically at feed supplies and implement scenarios to conserve hay. Monitoring cow body condition is critical as producers count hay bales to access the available feed. Body condition scoring of the cows, recording the scores and analyzing the data are necessary to stay on top of herd management.

An internet search on condition scoring beef cows will bring up copious examples. Many have charts and images. I like to review the "2001 IRM Pocket Reference" published and sponsored by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

Let's review: Cows with a body condition score of 3 or lower have little to no fat cover, with prominent backbone, hips and ribs evident, and in the extreme case, are emaciated. These cows are problematic because they seldom will rebreed in a timely manner and certainly exhibit indicators of pending nutritional issues.

If present, these signs are indicating at least some of the cows are not meeting their nutritional requirements. The herd may look fine as a whole, but pay attention to the younger and older cows.

As pressure for feed increases with limited feed, herd hierarchy takes over. The middle-aged cows eat first and the rest fend for themselves. When feed is plentiful, contentment within the herd offsets bullying by hungry cows. Thus, lower condition score cows are indicators that feeding issues are present.

What percent of the herd is condition score 3 or lower? The answer is that even 1 percent is too many because these cows are unlikely to rebreed or, in some cases, even raise a calf.

Producers should condition score monthly to watch for cows that are pushed aside. For every 100 cows that walk by, if five cows are trending to condition score 3 or lower, the operation has problems. More feed needs to arrive or fewer mouths need to be fed. Always keep in mind that as difficult as it is to part with cows, allowing cows to lose condition is not a good approach.

On the positive side, the goal of the monthly walk-by is to see borderline condition score 4 cows advance to a condition score 5 or 6. That's an indication the feed supply is meeting the cow inventory's needs.

Let's review some more: Cows with a condition score 5 or 6 do not have visible ribs, and the backbone and hips are smoother, without pronounced visual evidence of individual bones.

The cows appear physically fit, and move well, alertly and contently. Cows with body condition scores of 5 or 6 will assure a good pregnancy rate and certainly will reward the producer's effort. Essentially, the management plan is working, reflecting the appropriate allocation of feed to meet good management goals with good genetics.

Looking forward to this spring's grass, revisiting the condition score 4 cows and setting them aside for some extra nutrition certainly will help initiate gain on grass and help boost their ability to rebreed as well. Thus, make sure pasture management provides good spring pasture as a final checkup coming out of a difficult winter feeding period.

Discussing heavily conditioned cows has little purpose in years when hay is short; however, keeping track of those cows that flesh well, and their sires, certainly should help plan for future genetic opportunity to combat feed shortages. Forage efficiency and gain for brood cows always should be part of long-term replacement discussions.

Finally, let's not forget the thin cows if present; those cows with a body condition score of 3 or lower simply should not be in the herd. But when they are, pen cows that are having difficulty, as noted by body condition, separately. Particularly do that for the older and younger cows. Feeding the correct amount plus some supplement while penning separately will help the thinner cows.

When feed is short, always, always keep an eye on cow condition. However, producers have no magical cure. Cows need a daily supply of adequate feed.

Not all plans work, though, and sometimes producers may find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Still, even if the answer is not the desired answer, if stored hay or upcoming grass is inadequate, then make plans to move the cattle. Every day a cow goes without adequate feed, the pending situation only will get worse. Cows need to eat and calves need to nurse.

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.

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Attachments



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EPS - color - If Hay is Short, Move the Cows
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EPS - black - If Hay is Short, Move the Cows
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Images



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