

Managing Cow Body Condition on Late-Summer Pasture

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Cow body condition in late summer is a key indicator of future productivity and potential reproductive success over the winter through the next spring. It is simply a visual assessment of muscle, fat, and associated tissue present in certain areas of the cow's body. These assessments can give a general idea of what the long-term nutritional status of the cow has been and gives clues as to how to manage future nutritional needs. It can be measured at any time, however, late summer usually gives the most useful information because of the relationship of late summer cow body condition and winter feed costs, calving difficulty, and rebreeding success.

Winter energy needs are a key component of feeding costs over the winter. As muscle tissue and fat composition decrease, more body heat is lost, therefore, it will take more dietary energy to maintain a static maintenance level. In a situation where body condition is less than adequate, the additional energy needs will be acquired through increasing dietary intake, increasing diet energy density, or both. Additionally, increasing body condition during winter in preparation for calving and breeding can be extremely expensive. Not only are maintenance energy requirements higher, but it will take additional energy to add any body condition over maintenance levels.

Evaluating body condition on cows is generally accomplished using a body condition score (BCS) scale between 1 and 9; where 1 is the thinnest cow and 9 is the fattest. Cows are considered thin if they have a BCS of ≤ 4 (Figure 1). The ideal BCS for a cow in most situations is going to be a 5 (Figure 2). Cows considered to have too much condition will have a BCS of ≥ 6 (Figure 3). Most managers like to see cows come off grass in the fall having a BCS between 5 and 6. This gives the cows a little leeway going into winter.

Commonly though, cows tend to lose a lot of condition on pastures in late summer and fall. Condition is run off either because there is not enough grass to meet nutritional requirements or grass quality is too low to meet nutrient requirements. Therefore, it is generally a good idea to evaluate cow BCS in mid-August to determine if any diet corrections are needed. It is important to recognize there is a lag-time between the time a pasture is unable to meet cow nutrient requirements and the time a manager can visually see cows becoming thin. Therefore, if a dietary adjustment is needed according to BCS assessment, action should be taken quickly to correct the deficiency.

In situations where cows are losing body condition on pasture in late summer, there are several options to increase dietary nutrient composition to maintain or improve cow body condition. Where convenient and close, cows can be supplemented on pasture with roughage, concentrate, or feed byproducts. In situations where feeding is not practical or economical, consider early weaning calves to stop lactation and reduce nutrient requirements. Other situations may require thin cows be sorted off and sent to a drylot. Dire situations may call for all cows to be pulled off pasture and drylotted.

Whatever the situation may call for, farmers who identify the early signs of poor pasture conditions and the resulting loss of cattle condition will have a number of opportunities to correct the situation. Using the BCS scale is an easy way to assess cattle condition on pasture. Good management to alleviate nutritional deficiencies early will pay big dividends in the long run.

Figure 1. Mature cow in body condition score 4.



Figure 2. Mature cow in body condition score 5.



Figure 3. Mature cow in body condition score 6.

