

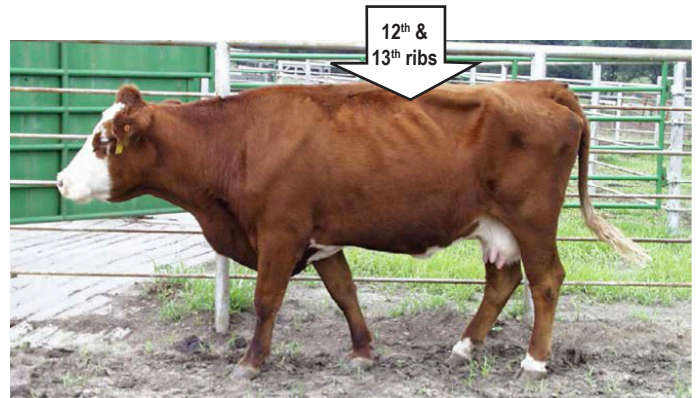


# Cow Body Condition Score To Manage Your Beef Herd

*Joslyn Beard*

Body condition score (BCS): numerical scale (1-9) used to describe the body composition of both fat and muscle of a cow herd.

<b>THIN</b>	<b>1</b>	Cow is severely thin, physically weak with shoulder, ribs, back, hooks and pin bones sharp to the touch easily visible. Extremely rare, usually indicative of disease or parasites.
	<b>2</b>	Cow is severely thin but not weakened. No evidence of fat with some muscle loss in hindquarters and shoulder.
	<b>3</b>	Very thin with very little fat cover over the ribs, back and loin area. Backbone is easily visible with spine processes can be touched and easily seen.



**BCS-3**



**BCS-5**

<b>MODERATE</b>	<b>4</b>	Cow appears thin, foreribs are not visible but the 11 <sup>th</sup> – 13 <sup>th</sup> ribs are noticeable. Spinal processes are barely visible individually and feel rounded when palpated.
	<b>5</b>	The 12 <sup>th</sup> and 13 <sup>th</sup> rib are not visible unless animal is shrunk. Vertebrae down the back and over the hip can be felt with firm pressure but feel rounded with spaces between vertebrae are filled. Little evidence of fat is present in the brisket, over the ribs, and around the tail head.
	<b>6</b>	Cow looks smooth throughout. Ribs are fully covered; hindquarters and shoulders are full and plump. Back appears rounded and firm pressure is needed to feel vertebrae.

<b>FLESHY</b>	<b>7</b>	Brisket is full, and tail heads show pockets of fat. Ends of spinal processes can only be felt with firm pressure. Ribs are smooth and soft handling.
	<b>8</b>	Cow is obese, with a thick neck. Animal begins to look blocky, as her back appears to be square. Bone structure disappears, fat cover is sponge like, brisket is distended and full. Fat pockets develop around the tail head.
	<b>9</b>	Very obese cows, rarely seen. Bone structure can barely be felt or seen. Animal's mobility may be impaired, very square appearance. Cows also develop heavy deposition of udder fat.



**BCS-7**

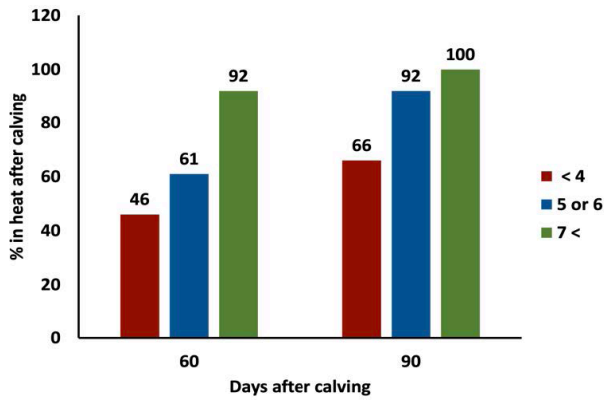


Figure 1

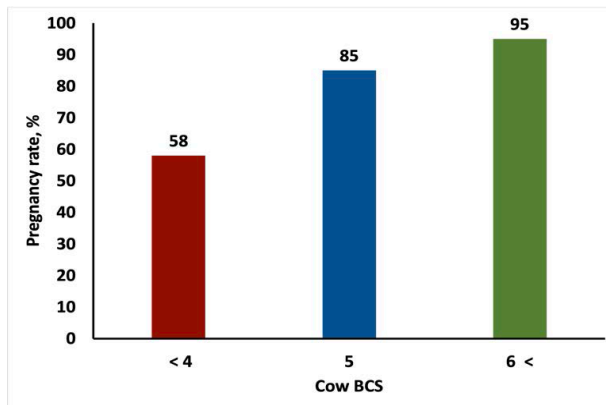


Figure 2

Research from Whitman, 1975 and Sprott, 1985

## What's The Big Deal About BCS?

Increasing body condition of a herd requires cattle to consume a diet that is balanced for minerals, vitamins, and protein with excess energy (TDN). Each body condition score is equal to roughly 90 pounds, including some of the fetus and fetal membrane fluids. Additionally, each BCS is about a 4% increase in fat. For example, moving a cow from a BCS 4 to BCS 5 is about 90 pounds with 4% more body fat.

## Cow BCS Is Directly Related To Cow Productivity

Cows with a thin BCS (< 4) typically take a longer time to cycle back after calving (Fig. 1) and have lower pregnancy rates (Fig. 2) compared to better conditioned cows (5 <). This is due to how a cow's body naturally prioritizes nutrients from the diet. Cows on a negative plane of nutrition, not meeting their requirements, will cause the body to partition nutrients to priority areas such as maintenance for cow survival.

Due to this nutrient shift thin cows can have a harder time breeding back because of breeding being a lower priority (Fig. 3).

## For more info:

[extension.arizona.edu/files/pubs/az1726](http://extension.arizona.edu/files/pubs/az1726)

## Important Times to Condition Score Cows:

Late Summer, Early Fall	Important time to condition score cows in drought years and in extensive systems. Thin cows should be supplemented and early weaning decisions need to be considered.
Weaning Time	Young cows are especially important to look at weaning their first calves, most likely they will be thin at this time. May need to consider early weaning calves on young cows along with supplementation strategies.
45 Days after Weaning	Gives a good estimate of how quickly cows bounced back after weaning. Thin cows should be increasing their condition if matched with proper feed resources.
90 Days before Calving	Last chance to economically increase condition for thin cows. Ideally, separating and then supplementing thin cows from good conditioned cows will help.
Calving Time	If cows are thin, consider adding or changing pre-calving nutrition management. It takes a large amount of feed to improve cow condition after calving.
Breeding	Thin cows may indicate a poor pairing of available grazing nutrient conditions with cow requirements. Consider moving calving season by a few weeks to better synch forage green up with increased cow requirements.

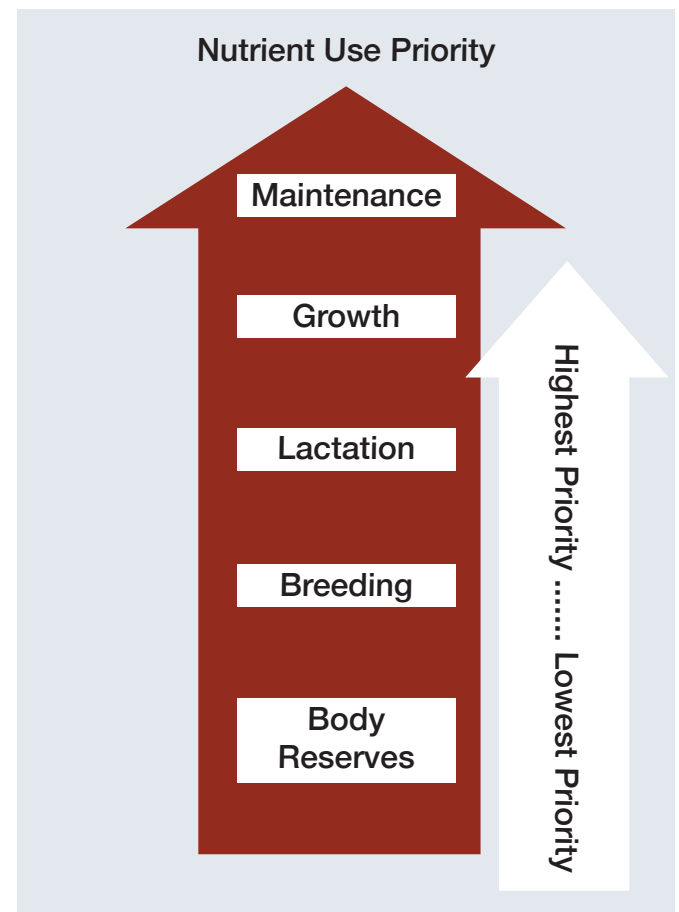


Figure 3



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