

Condition Score Your Cows

Condition scoring is one of the most valuable, yet underutilized, feeding management tools available. The most commonly used method of scoring is based on a scale of 1 to 5 where a score of 1 is given to an emaciated cow; 5 to a very fat animal. The accompanying chart details the appearance of 8 key areas on the cow which are used to determine the score.

The main objective of condition scoring is to have cows calving with a score of 3.5 to 3.75. In this condition they are carrying adequate reserves which, combined with maximum nutrient intake in early lactation, allow them to reach their highest possible peaks. If normal persistencies can be maintained in mid and late lactation, every extra kg of peak yield can result in an additional 200-250 kg of production over the lactation.

Excessively fat cows (score >4), have been shown to consume less feed after calving, which negates the potential contribution of their extra body reserves. These cows also have a higher incidence of metabolic problems around calving.

When to score

All cows should be scored immediately after calving to assess their reserves as lactation begins. Scoring before calving is less reliable because of the distortion resulting from pregnancy.

It is often suggested that cows should not be permitted to lose more than 1 to 1.25 points of condition after calving. However, the only practical means of minimizing condition loss is to maximize nutrient intake in early lactation. Some cows will sacrifice more body condition than others to produce to their genetic potential. Individual feed intakes also vary widely and are strongly influenced by ration composition, feeding systems, social interaction and facilities (see Alberta Dairy Management article III).

Where cows are fed grain individually (computers, parlour or tie-stall), they should be scored

again after production begins to fall post-peak : about 125-150 days in milk (DIM). Their condition at this time will dictate the amount of extra feed they require, above production requirements, to restore condition before the end of lactation. To check progress toward this goal, condition scoring should be done again at 225-250 DIM. This will allow adjustments to be made to the amount of grain being fed. A final check on condition should be made at dry-off. Since cows should neither gain nor lose condition during the dry period, the score at dry-off should be the same as that at calving. If not, the dry cow feeding program may need revision.

Herds being fed a one-group TMR should be scored at calving and dry-off. If the average condition of cows at dry-off is above 3.5 or below 3.0, the TMR energy level should be rebalanced. Cows with extreme scores may have to be replaced, since they cannot be fed individually.

Herds using multiple group TMRs should use condition scoring as well as production level to decide when cows should be transferred to a group being fed a higher or lower energy ration.

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SCORE COWS AT THESE TIMES

