

How Thin Is Too Thin

SPRINGFIELD, MO.

Most beef cow-calf owners will say their spring or fall calving cows are in “good” shape according to Eldon Cole, livestock specialist, University of Missouri Extension. “But when you judge those cows visually, you

worst and are physically weak. “Fortunately, not too many 1’s, 2’s and even 3’s are seen in well-managed operations unless health conditions are involved,” said Cole.

Body condition scores from 4 to 6 are the most often seen in typical southwest Missouri herds.



Photo of a 4 body condition cow. A 5 BCS animal is usually called moderate to thin. A cow in a BCS of 6 is likely the “just right” condition in most people’s opinion.

Photo courtesy of University of Missouri



Photo of a 7+ slightly obese body condition scoring cow.



Photo of a 6 body condition cow. The 7 BCS up to the 9’s are in very good flesh with very full briskets; but the 8’s and 9’s are truly obese.

may say they’re a little thin or maybe even some are too fat. Not all of them are ‘good’,” said Cole.

Body condition does matter especially in the area of reproductive efficiency.

“If you want 75 percent plus to breed in the first 21 days of the breeding season, the level of condition plays a major role,” said Cole.

According to Cole, the Body Condition Scoring (BCS) system now used to subjectively describe cow, heifer and bull fleshiness serves a useful purpose and is fairly easy to learn.

The BCS for beef cattle is set up on a scale of 1 to 9.

Low numbers 1, 2, 3 are very thin with ribs and backbones easily visible. The 1’s are the

A 4 BCS cow or bull is thin with all the ribs and backbone showing. “Animals in this condition are generally considered thin and in need of some extra groceries,” said Cole.

A 5 BCS animal is usually called moderate to thin. The last two ribs are visible especially if the haircoat isn’t heavy. There is little evidence of fat in the brisket or around the tail head. “Cows that are 5’s and have just weaned a calf, should be of no concern as good pasture will allow the dry cow to gain enough flesh to be a 6 by the time she calves,” said Cole.

A cow in a BCS of 6 is likely the “just right” condition in most people’s opinion. They have a smooth appearance and they have fat in the brisket and around the tail. Some fat can be palpated over the ribs. “First-calf heifers should carry this degree of condition at calving if you expect to get them bred back to calve in 12 months,” said Cole.

The 7 BCS up to the 9’s are in very good flesh with very full briskets, there’s fat cover over the ribs and the back looks square due to fat deposits. “The 8’s and 9’s are truly obese and usually result from being dry for a while and receiving too much high quality

feed. You’re likely to have as much trouble with cows on this end of the scale as the 1’s to 3’s,” said Cole.

Cole recommends using BCS to get a feel for the quality of your breeding stock.

“If you find several in the four range or even the seven range you may want to make some sorting and feeding management changes. It can save money and stretch the feed supply,” said Cole.

For more tips on the use of BCS visit with a MU Extension livestock specialists in southwest Missouri: Eldon Cole in Mt. Vernon, (417) 466-3102; Gary Naylor in Dallas County, (417) 345-7551; and Dona Goede in Cedar County, (417) 276-3313. △