



Farm Animal Council of Saskatchewan Inc.

## Body Condition Scoring

Body Condition Scoring (BCS) is a valuable management tool for estimating the amount of energy reserves (body fat) an animal is carrying. Body condition can be used to adjust feeding programs throughout the year to optimize efficient use of available feed, to maintain herd fertility (i.e. the likelihood of cows cycling and breeding on time) and indirectly, to maintain calf weaning weights.

In a sense, BCS adds scientific calibration to the experienced eye of the cattleman. BCS, as a hands-on determination, even though it is somewhat subjective, is more accurate than visual appraisal alone. Even the experienced eye will have trouble picking more than the extremes of very thin or very fat in a herd with a mixture of body types. Through discerning and managing the in-between scores of the majority of the cow herd the good cattleperson can make a difference in controlling feed costs while maintaining productivity.

The **Scottish Body Condition Scoring System**, which is widely used in Canada, describes five scores (1 through 5) but allows for half scores e.g. BCS 2.5 would indicate an animal is between BCS 2 and BCS 3 in condition. It is easy to learn, anyone can do it.

### BCS as a Management Tool

Ideally the herd should be body condition scored at weaning, at calving and 30 days before breeding. Each cow should be scored and records kept from year to year. In a large herd, scoring a percentage of cows might be sufficient.

For optimum efficiency of winter feeding and rebreeding following calving, mature cows should go into winter with a minimum BCS of 3.0 and not drop below BCS 2.5 at calving or during the breeding season. First and second calf heifers should not drop below 3.0 at calving and during the breeding season. Nutritional management strategies which focus on maintaining these BCS levels result in lower winter feed costs, faster post calving return to oestrus, higher percentage of calves born early in calving season and higher weaning weights.

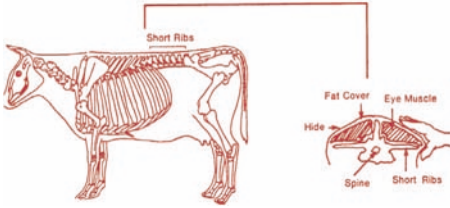
One-half BCS represents about 100 lbs of body weight in a mature cow, which would weigh 1100 lbs at BCS 2.5. Based on 150+ days winter-feeding to calving, an 1100 lb cow with BCS 2.5 at weaning needs about 22 to 24 lbs of hay per day to maintain body condition through to calving. If she weighed 1200 lbs with BCS 3.0, she can get by with 18 to 20 lbs of hay, lose 0.5 lbs per day and still calve with BCS 2.5. If she weighed 1000 lbs with BCS 2.0 she would need about 30 to 32 lbs of hay to reach BCS 2.5 at calving as she needs more feed to keep warm and to gain weight. If cows are not gaining condition late in the fall, consider creep feeding the calves and weaning early. Feed first and second calf heifers and thin cows separately from the main herd and remember that some of the herd may not maintain or gain condition even with adequate feed so be prepared to adjust groupings during winter.

Flushing only works if a cow can gain enough condition to reach BCS 2.5 by breeding time. If she calves with BCS 2.0 and you want to breed her in 60 to 90 days, she needs to gain 1.5 lbs daily plus feed her calf, so adjust the ration accordingly (about 10 extra pounds of barley). However, if she is a good milker, with the extra feed she may produce more milk than the calf can use, which creates problems in itself.

### How to Estimate BCS

Body fat content is estimated by thumb pressure on the end of the short ribs over the loin area between the hip bone (hook) and the last rib. There is no muscle at the end of the short ribs so any padding on the ribs is fat cover.

Figure 1: BCS is estimated by thumb pressure on the ends of the short ribs.



**BCS 1 – Severely emaciated**

- Individual short ribs are sharp to the touch as are virtually all skeletal structures.
- There is no fat around the tailhead; hip bones, tailhead and ribs are visually prominent.

**BCS 2 – Moderately thin**

- Individual short ribs can be identified but feel rounded not sharp.
- Some fat cover is visible around the tailhead and over the hip bones; individual ribs are no longer obvious.

**BCS 3 – Optimum**

- Ends of short ribs can only be felt with firm pressure.
- Fat on either side of the tailhead can easily be felt.

**BCS 4 – Moderately fleshy**

- Short ribs cannot be felt even with firm pressure.
- Soft rounds of fat are visible around the tailhead; folds of fat are beginning to develop over ribs and thighs.

**BCS 5 – Very fat**

- Short ribs are completely covered in fat and bone structure is no longer evident.
- Tailhead and hip bones are buried in fat; folds of fat are evident over ribs and thighs.

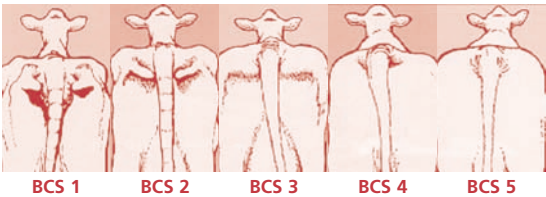


Figure 2: The BCS score estimated by thumb pressure on the short ribs is corroborated by visually appraising fat cover around the tailhead and hips.

For more detailed information see:

- Western Forage Beef Group – [www.foragebeef.ca](http://www.foragebeef.ca)
- Body Condition, Alberta Beef Herd Management Reference Binder p 413.
- Beef cow body condition management – [www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex6775](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex6775)
- Evaluating Cow Nutritional Status NDSU – [www.ext.nodak.edu/extpubs/ansci/beef/coping/status.htm](http://www.ext.nodak.edu/extpubs/ansci/beef/coping/status.htm)



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