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Animal scientist discusses cow body-condition scoring

Beef cattle producers know that a cow's body condition at the time of calving will affect the health of her calf and her ability to breed back in a timely manner.

A Kansas State University animal scientist encourages cattlemen to use a body-condition score system to determine their cows' condition.

"A body-condition score on a beef cow is the closest thing we have to determining her nutritional status at a glance," said Chris Reinhardt, livestock specialist with K-State Research and Extension, "but scoring cows properly and really benefitting from this tool requires more effort and observation than simply looking and thinking, 'They look a little thin.'"

The reason for talking about the scoring system now is that there is still time to adjust the nutrient supply to get the cows into the target score by calving time, Reinhardt said.

To evaluate an individual cow, he said, look at her topline, brisket, ribs, flank, round and tail head. A borderline thin cow (score = 4) will clearly show three to four ribs first thing in the morning, will have no obvious fat deposits in the brisket or tailhead and the individual vertebrae along the topline will be visible.

The cow still shows some muscle through the round, and she may appear "healthy but thin."

In a borderline fleshy cow (score = 6), the ribs and vertebrae will not be obvious, as they are covered by fat. The muscling through the round will be plump and full, but muscle definition is still apparent, and there will be small but noticeable fat deposits behind the shoulder, in the flank, brisket and around the tail head.

The "ideal" or "target" score for cows at the time of calving is 5, Reinhardt said. This cow will show the last one to two ribs first thing in the morning before feeding and have good fullness of muscle in the round with good muscle definition. The spine will be apparent, but individual vertebrae will not be discernible, and with no obvious fat deposits behind the shoulder or around the tail head.

"We would say this cow has a good bloom," he added.

A change in score (from 4 to 5, for example) requires

Scoring herd simple process

Keeping track of an individual cow's development using the body condition scoring system may be simple enough, but what about a whole herd?

"Body condition scoring the herd is a simple process, and can be done on a large paper tablet," said K-State Research and Extension livestock specialist Chris Reinhardt.

"Make columns for BCS 3, 4, 5, and 6 and as you pass through the herd first thing in the morning, make a tick mark for each cow in each of the columns. Multiply the number of 3s by 3, the 4s by 4, etc., add up the total score and divide by the total number of tick marks. This gives you an average BCS for the herd."

More important than the average is how many cows you've got in the critical scores of 3 and 4, he said. Fours can be easily fed into the 5 range, but 3s could potentially not cycle in time to stay in the herd. If 3s can be fed into the 4 range, they'll have a chance to breed, albeit late during the normal breeding season.

the addition of 75 to 100 pounds of live body weight, depending on the mature size or frame size of the cows, the livestock specialist said.

"If you're two months from the start of calving and would like to add 0.5 to 1.0 to the score, you'll need to feed the cows for maintenance, the last one-third of gestation, and an additional 1.0 to 1.5 pounds per day of gain. This means increasing the amount of good-quality hay as well as the amount of supplement."

Reinhardt said that thin cows (score 4 or below) can be separated off and fed at a higher plane.

"The argument can be made that this creates 'welfare cows,'" he said, "however, good record-keeping will indicate whether these cows are perennial 'hard-keepers' or if they are simply too young or too old to compete with the mature cows."

"If they're too young, another year of maturity should cure this; if they're too old, you may consider culling them after weaning time. The key here is that good record keeping allows you to cull intentionally based on productivity, not based on lack of observation and management."

Cows at a 5 at the time of calving should provide adequate colostrum and nutrition for their calf and breed back in a timely fashion, Reinhardt said. Cows that calve below a 5 will delay their return to estrus and breed back late. If these cows do not maintain a 365-day calving cycle, they could, after one to two late breedings, effectively cull themselves due to being open at pregnancy check time.

"Young cows are especially susceptible to this because they are gestating a calf, nursing a calf and still growing frame and muscle themselves," he said. "Unfortunately, young cows are the future of your herd and possibly your most progressive genetics. Hopefully these cows aren't culled simply for lack of nutrients."

Reinhardt encourages ranchers to take time to evaluate the nutrient status of their cow herds this winter, and to use the body scoring system to manage the fertility and health of their herds going into next spring.

"That way, you give yourself full control over the genetics of your herd for years to come," he said.

Caroling 'flash mob' serenades travelers

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — A caroling flash mob hit the Orlando International Airport to bring some holiday cheer to stressed-out travelers.

A flash mob is an organized group that suddenly materializes in a public place, engages in odd behavior and then disperses. In this instance, participants got advance permission from airport and Transportation Security officials for the Saturday event.

Just after 4 p.m., 120 members

of the Messiah Choral Society and the Bach Festival Choir erupted into rendition of Handel's "Messiah."

Travelers whipped out camera phones, applauded raucously and tearfully thanked the singers.

On the Beat

COLBY POLICE Saturday

12:47 a.m. — Caller reported a vehicle westbound at Fourth and Range had one person jump out of vehicle and into pickup bed while at stop light. Not found.

3:25 a.m. — Checked vehicle parked at Fike Park. Keys inside brought to station.

3:54 a.m. — Checked hitchhiker at Oasis; vehicle broke down on I-70, unknown location.

10:57 a.m. — Assisted ambulance crew.

11:13 a.m. — Assisted ambulance crew.

1:50 p.m. — Hit-and-run accident at 1150 S. Franklin Lot. 15 about 3 a.m.

2:03 p.m. — Assisted ambulance crew and deputies.

4:31 p.m. — All OK with hitchhiker checked at southwest entrance to Walmart.

4:35 p.m. — Caller reported ex-husband still in parking lot after dropping off child. All OK; spoke to subjects.

8:05 p.m. — Accident at Fifth and Lincoln.

Sunday

1:09 a.m. — Security check at Twister's.

1:15 p.m. — Caller reported large object in roadway in the 500 block of W. Fifth Street. Object was hot tub cover; removed from roadway.

6:11 p.m. — Domestic disturbance: 911 caller reported ex-spouse trying to take child, wanted him to leave. Report filed.

6:32 p.m. — Theft of license tag from vehicle. Entered in National

Crime Information Center.

Monday

1:17 a.m. — Check at Walmart.

6:18 p.m. — Provided directions from 400 block of East Fourth to Santa City.

7:59 p.m. — Caller reported seeing two subjects arguing. All OK.

9:20 p.m. — Hit and run: caller reported son's vehicle struck earlier while parked at Colby Community Building. Vehicle at home, reporting party to come in Tuesday for report.

11:27 p.m. — Loud noise reported. Subject spoken to.

THOMAS COUNTY SHERIFF Saturday

12:58 a.m. — Helped Colby police look for vehicle.

1:51 a.m. — Driving under the influence/possession report filed on traffic stop.

4:38 a.m. — Caller reported cattle out on I-70. One out up by fence, put back in pasture.

5:19 a.m. — Checked vehicle, belonged to subject at Oasis.

2:03 p.m. — Assisted ambulance crew.

4:04 p.m. — 911 caller reported accident.

4:19 p.m. — Assisted Highway Patrol on drug and traffic stop.

5:58 p.m. — Dead deer in roadway in the 2200 block of southbound K-25 removed from roadway.

7:19 p.m. — Caller reported vehicle driving erratically at Rexford. Not found.

Sunday

2:28 a.m. — Report filed for driving under the influence on traffic stop. Van's towed vehicle.

Monday

10:24 a.m. — Two vehicle identification number inspections.

Real Estate

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Court pays tab

CLEVELAND (AP) — An Ohio judge has joined lawyers in chipping in money to help clear a defendant's record.

The formerly homeless woman was in a county court in Cleveland earlier this month seeking to have a minor felony expunged, but she didn't have \$57 needed to pay restitution.

A judge not handling the case heard about the woman's plight and plucked \$20 out of his wallet to help. Two public defenders came up with matching amounts.

Judge Timothy McCormick told *The Plain Dealer* it seemed like the easiest and best thing for him to do, especially given the season.

He received a lengthy thank-you note from the defendant.

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