

Evaluation of Body Condition Score on Cows and Bred Heifers

Winter is here and the spring calving season is around the corner. Now is the time to again evaluate Body Condition Score (BCS) on cows and bred heifers. For optimum rebreeding next year, mature cows need to be at a BCS 5 or better when they calve; bred heifers need to be in a BCS 5.5 to 6 when they calve. Cows and heifers that calve in a lower BCS have a delayed return to estrus which can delay rebreeding next spring. If producers have a limited breeding season, this delay can result lower pregnancy rates and hence lower calf crop the next year. Delayed rebreeding can also reduce weaning weights the following year because the calves are born later and are younger when weaned. So, cow and heifer management between now and calving time in 2017 can affect ranch income in 2018; yes 2018.

If cows are not in the third trimester of pregnancy yet, they soon will be. This final three months of pregnancy is when 75% of fetal growth occurs. So the daily nutrient requirements of the cows are on the rise at a time when quality of grazed forage is declining and winter climate is becoming more stressful.

So, evaluate BCS now. Determine the status of your herd today so you manage the nutrition over the next several weeks and hit the desired BCS at calving. If cows and heifers are in adequate BCS today, the task ahead is to keep them in that condition leading up to calving. If instead BCS is lower than a 5 or 6 today, then the task at hand is to add condition in the time remaining before calving.

Dormant forages generally contain an adequate amount of energy to support a pregnant cow IF there is an adequate supply of forage in front of the cows. However, the crude protein (CP) content of the forage is usually low relative to the cow's needs and the needs of the ruminal microbes that ferment the forage and supply nutrients to the cow. When CP is deficient, daily forage and energy intake will suffer and possibly lead to weight and condition loss.

So, the first nutrient of concern is CP. Focus on a feed supplement with concentrated CP; cost comparisons should take into account the cost per unit of CP in the supplement. If the forage supply is adequate, then a relatively low amount of supplement with a high CP concentration is usually sufficient. On the otherhand, if the supply of forage in front of the cows is inadequate (overstocked) or the cows and heifers need a push to gain some condition, then focus turns to supplying both CP and energy to the cows. This will require a supplement with a lower concentration of CP that is fed in greater amounts to supply the energy. Cost comparisons should take into account the cost per unit of energy (TDN) in the supplement.

Always ensure that mineral requirements of the cows and heifers are satisfied. Supplemental minerals may be supplied by a free-choice complete mineral supplement or may be present in the range supplements mentioned earlier. "Complete" means the supplement contains all the necessary macrominerals and trace minerals.

Monitoring BCS and managing supplemental nutrition are two management tasks that are necessary to reduce the production risk for the 2018 calf crop.