

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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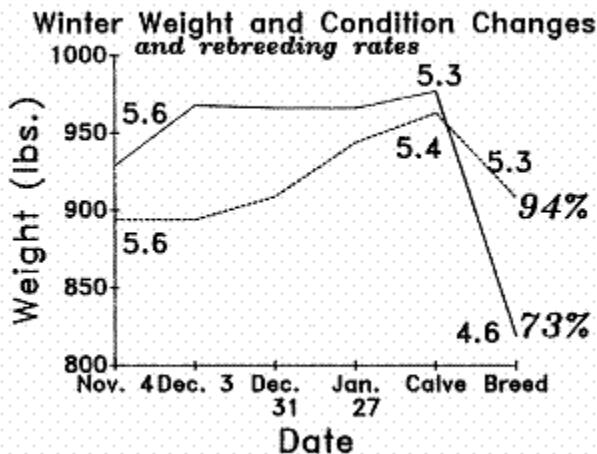
The winter of 2007-2008 has brought challenges in the form of very high feed prices, cold weather, and in some instances, short hay supplies. Cows in many Midwestern herds are calving in marginal body condition. Unfortunately, this is a season where maintaining or gaining body condition on spring calving cows is really quite difficult. Warm season grasses have not yet begun to grow. Dormant grass (what little is left) is a low quality feed. Cows cannot, or will not, consume a large amount of standing dormant grass at this time year. If the only supplement being fed is a self-fed, self-limited protein source, the cows may become very deficient in energy. Remember, the instructions that accompany these self-fed supplements. They are to be fed along with free choice access to adequate quality forages.

There is another factor that compounds the problem. A small amount of winter annual grasses may begin to grow in native pastures. These are the first tastes of green grass many cows have seen since last summer. The cows may try to forage these high moisture, low energy density grasses, in lieu of more energy dense hays or cubes. **The sad result is the loss of body condition in early lactation beef cows just before the breeding season is about to begin.**

Body condition at the time of calving is the most important factor affecting rebreeding performance of normally managed beef cows. Nonetheless, condition changes after calving will have more subtle effects on rebreeding especially in cows that are in marginal body condition. Body condition changes from the time the cow calves until she begins the breeding season can play a significant role in the rebreeding success story. This appears to be most important to those cows that calve in the marginal body condition score range of "4" or "5". An Oklahoma trial illustrates the vulnerability of cows that calve in the body condition score of 5. Two groups of cows began the winter feeding period in similar body condition and calved in very similar body condition. However, after calving and before the breeding season began, one group was allowed to lose almost one condition score. The other group of cows was fed adequately to maintain the

body condition that they had prior to calving. The difference in rebreeding rate was dramatic (73% vs 94%). Again this illustrates that cows that calve in the body condition score of 5 are very vulnerable to weather and suckling intensity stresses and ranchers must use good nutritional strategies after calving to avoid disastrous rebreeding performance.

Figure 1. Change in body condition after calving influences rebreeding rates. Cows that maintain body condition (dashed line) had a rebreeding rate of 94%. Cows that lost body condition after calving (solid line) had a rebreeding rate of 73% (Wettemann, et al., 1987 Journ. Animal Sci., Suppl. 1:63).



Cows should calve in moderate to good condition (scores of 5 or 6) to ensure good rebreeding efficiency. Ideally, cows should be maintaining condition during mid to late pregnancy and gaining during breeding. The goal of the management program should be to achieve these body conditions by making maximum use of the available forage resource.

Continue feeding a source of energy, such as moderate to good quality grass hay free choice and/or high energy cubes until the warm season grasses grow enough to provide both the energy and protein that the lactating cows need. Yes, the feed is high-priced. But the cost of losing 21% of next year's calf crop is even greater!

Know the Cull Cow Grades Before You Sell

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Some culling of beef cows occurs in most herds every year. The Beef Audits have generally shown that cull cows, bulls, and cull dairy cows make up about 20% of the beef available for consumption in the United States. About half of this group (or 10% of the beef supply) comes from cull beef cows.

In a drought-plagued year, the percentage of some herds that are being culled goes even higher than the survey estimates of 20% of each cow herd. Whether we are culling because of drought

or to improve the productivity of the herd, it is important to understand the values placed on cull cows intended for slaughter.

The USDA market news service reports on four classes of cull cows. The four classes are divided primarily on fatness. The highest conditioned cull cows are reported as "Breakers". They usually are quite fleshy and generally have excellent dressing percentages. Body condition score 7 and above are required to be "Breakers".

The next class is a more moderate conditioned group of cows called "Boners" or "Boning Utility". These cows usually would fall in the body condition score grades of 5 to 7. Many well-nourished commercial beef cows would be graded "Boners".

The last two groups of cows as reported by the market news service are the "Leans" and "Lights". These cows are very thin (Body condition scores 1 - 4). They are in general expected to be lower in dressing percentage than the fleshier cows and are more easily bruised while being transported than are cows in better body condition. "Lights" are thin cows that are very small and would have very low hot carcass weights.

Leans and Lights are nearly always lower in price per pound than are the Boners and the Breakers. "Lights" often bring the lowest price per pound because the amount of saleable product is small, even though the overhead costs of slaughtering and processing are about the same as larger, fleshier cows.

Producers that sell cull cows should pay close attention to the market news reports about the price differentials of the cows in these classes. Cull cows that can be fed enough to gain body condition to improve from the Lean class to Boner class can gain weight and gain in value per pound at the same time. Seldom, if ever, does this situation exist elsewhere in the beef business. Ideally, market your cull cows while still in good enough condition to fall in the Boner grade. If cows are being culled while very thin, consider short term dry lot feeding to take them up in weight and up in grade. With the high price of feed in today's economic climate, some close scrutiny of the amount of feed per pound of added gain is warranted. Changing body composition of adult cows must be done in two months or less. Feed consumed per pound of gain will become to expensive once the cows have returned to normal (BCS=5) body condition. Rarely does it pay to feed enough to move the cow to "Breaker" class. There is very little if any price advantage of Breakers over Boners and cows lose feed efficiency if fed to that degree of fatness.

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