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John E. Shirley

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BODY CONDITION SCORING: A MANAGEMENT TOOL

J. E. Shirley

Summary

Body condition scoring provides a tool to help the dairy herd manager evaluate his/her nutrition and management program. It takes time, has an associated cost, and will result in a positive economic return if one makes management changes suggested by the results. Body condition scoring done simultaneously with other herd events reduces the time required and provides the herd manager with coordinated information.

(Key Words: Body Condition Score, Management Tool, Dairy Cattle.)

Introduction

Dairy herd managers have used the concept of body condition observation as a management tool for many years. Early usage simply employed poor, moderate, and fleshy as descriptive terms, whereas today's dairymen use a number system in an effort to quantitate the amount of subcutaneous fat. Thus, body condition scoring is not a new, magical technique that will guarantee success but an improved way to apply an old concept.

The purpose of this discourse is to answer, within our current knowledge, the questions; 1) why you should body condition score and 2) when you should body condition score.

Body condition scoring takes time; therefore, it has an associated cost and should result in a positive economic return. The economic return will be realized only

if you make management changes suggested by the results.

Reasons to Body Condition Score

1. Thin cows at parturition do not peak (milk yield) as high as cows in moderate condition.
2. Fat cows at parturition experience more calving problems and more metabolic problems, which translate into lower milk production.
3. A large decrease in body condition after calving may indicate that your feeding and management program for early lactation cows is inadequate.
4. Body condition is a good indicator of when a cow is ready to move from the high producer group to a lower producer group or when to change the amount of feed allocated in the parlor or from a computer-feeder.
5. Monitoring body condition and taking appropriate action will increase income.

Appropriate Times to Body Condition Score

Effective management decisions can be achieved if the manager has the appropriate information. Body condition scores taken at random times within a herd are often confusing and of limited value. The following general guidelines relative to when you should body condition score are

based on herd events rather than specific dates. This approach allows the manager to analyze body condition in conjunction with other routine tasks without trying to fit another observation into an already crowded schedule.

1. Within 3 days after calving.

This provides a better estimate of body condition at the beginning of lactation than if you body score just before parturition. Observations before calving tend to be higher and more variable because of the presence of the calf and body fluids.

2. The first postpartum reproductive tract examination (approximately day 21 after calving).

Our records indicate that most cows reach their minimum body condition by this time and remain stable for the next 60 to 90 days, if they are healthy and the feeding program is adequate.

3. The first insemination (after 41 days postpartum).

Body condition score at this time will generally be close to the body condition score at day 25 if everything is in order. If the score is significantly less (.5), you need to adjust your early lactation feeding program or herd health program.

4. Before changing from the early lactation or high cow ration.

The most efficient time to increase body condition occurs during the first 60 days after peak milk yield. Change rations only after cows have reached a body condition score of 3+.

5. Dry off time.

Cows should have a body score of 3.25 to 3.75 at dry off time. Cows scoring less than 3.25 should receive additional energy during the dry period to improve their body condition to at least 3.25. Cows over 3.75 should receive long stem grass hay and minerals and vitamins with limited (2 to 3 lbs.) or no grain until they reach 3.75 or a maximum of 4.0. Cows in the optimum range should receive adequate nutrients to maintain body condition.