

Pay Now or Pay Later

By David Hoffman, Livestock Specialist

With poor quality hay, tough winter weather (wet, cold, and mud) and calving season approaching, now is a critical time to monitor your cow's body condition. Body condition is a good measure of the nutrition level of your cowherd. Thin cows at calving can result in many problems.

Poor Quality Hay

Hay quality has been very poor for the past couple years. Rainy conditions caused hay to be harvested at extreme maturity or the hay was rained on once or numerous times. The result was hay that is deficient in energy and/or protein for cows. In addition, the fiber levels in these hays are high enough to prevent cows from consuming extra by eating more. So we will have cows that are calving or close to calving that are on a negative plane of nutrition.

Bad winter weather?

Wet cattle need added energy to keep warm at much higher air temperatures than dry cattle. January, February and March can result in several days that are cold, windy, icy or even mud. These conditions can result in the cow's energy requirement to be 15-25 percent above expected. Therefore, cows need more energy to keep warm and maintain body condition. Unless producers supplement during these nutritionally stressful times feeding grain or by-products, the cow will use her body reserves and lose body condition.

The Resulting Effects

Losing body condition in late gestation has a negative effect on calf vigor and cow reproduction. Cows in poor body condition will be delayed in the resumption of estrous cycles after calving. The beef cow's body has built in "sensors" that relay information about body condition and nutrient supply to the cow's brain that control reproduction. As a result of poor body condition at calving or breeding, thin cows will be later rebreeding or not rebreed at all.

In addition, calves born to cows in poor body condition result in "weak calf" syndrome and lower quality colostrums. This results in poorer performing calves and increased death loss. Now is the time to get cows back in shape, before calving. Increasing body condition before calving is much better for the cow and calf than trying to increase body condition after calving. After calving, the cow's system is geared toward milk production, so extra energy results in extra milk but little increase in body condition.

Feeding Cows Now

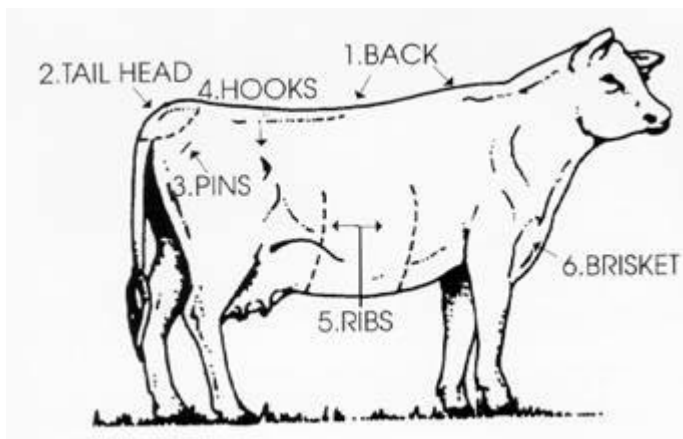
In our extremely wet, cold and muddy conditions, cows will need to eat 7-10 more pounds of hay or 3-5 pounds of grain. In most cases, cows will not be able to eat more hay, unless it is very good quality. In these conditions, cows should be supplemented. A hay test is recommended to determine the quality of your hay

before any supplementation occurs. Cows on a negative plane of nutrition can lose 1 to 2 pounds per day during wet, cold, and muddy conditions. There are many good sources of energy, with corn and grain by-products (corn gluten feed, soyhulls, wheat midds) offering the cheapest alternatives.

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Therefore, body condition score your cowherd and change your feeding program if needed. Failure to employ management strategies to increase energy intake (if needed) and improve body condition before calving will result in weaker calves this spring and too more open cows next fall.

Areas to evaluate body condition on a beef cow.



For additional information contact your livestock specialist or myself at 816-380-8460. May all your cows calve.