

Fall – Now is the Time to Improve Cow Body Condition

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As the forage in our pastures becomes more brown than green in appearance it is not uncommon to notice a few thin cows within the herd. As forage quality declines in late summer/fall it can be difficult for some cows to maintain body condition, especially young cows (first or second calf) or those with relatively high lactation potential. However, the best time to improve cow body condition on spring-calving cows is post-weaning during the fall.

The nutrient requirements of cows are at their lowest for approximately 45 to 60 days immediately following weaning. At that time, less feed or forage resources are required to meet the maintenance requirements of the cow than at any other time in the production cycle. Improving cow condition during the fall may also be regarded as an insurance policy against the unknowns of the upcoming winter months. Cows in good body condition (body condition score 5 or greater, 1- 9 scale) experience cold stress at lower temperatures than cows that are thin (body condition score 4 or less).

There are many different management/grazing strategies that may be used to improve cow condition during the fall. Weaning calves greatly reduces maintenance requirements and is an essential first step. The extent to which cows can gain weight and improve body condition depends heavily on the quality and quantity of the available forage resources. If calves are weaned early in the fall, cows grazing native pastures can gain condition with little or small amounts of supplemental feed, provided the supply of forage is not limiting. If necessary, supplements that provide both energy and protein are preferred and in many situations, energy may be more limiting than protein. Traditional range cubes, byproduct feedstuffs (distiller's grains, corn gluten feed), concentrates and even alfalfa may be used as supplements. Additionally, grazing opportunities such as corn or milo stalks with some grain present (grain drop) may also be used to put condition on cows during the fall.

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