

Collecting Mature Weight, Height and Body Condition Scores

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Matching cows to their environment is critical to proper utilization of resources. Low-cost producers over time will make more money than high-cost producers. Thus, cattlemen who achieve mature cow size that allows for low levels of supplemented feed, proper range utilization and optimum levels of reproduction in the cow herd will reduce input costs and become low-cost producers.

Uniformity, too, is critical to the survival of the industry and is receiving greater attention in modern beef production. Consumers want uniform and predictable beef products. Therefore, if Salers breeders produce uniform cattle, the products they market ultimately will be better suited for the consumer.

Seeing the importance of uniformity and mature cow size, EPDs, expected progeny differences, become important to evaluate. Mature cow size EPDs allow producers to obtain a consistent, uniform cow herd that matches their available environmental resources.

Salers breeders should collect mature cow measurements within 30 days after weaning calves. Measurements should include weight; hip height and body condition score (BCS) and should be taken on all cows at this time. Both the ROE-1 Multiple Registration application and the ROE-3 weaning worksheet include spaces for recording and reporting these measurements to ASA.

Weights

Cow weights can be collected at the same time as pregnancy checking in the fall (For Spring herd) or about the same time as weaning weights are collected. Weights should be measured on a balanced scale, not visually assigned. Weights should be taken on all cows at a similar time of the year to allow comparisons to be made.

Hip Heights

Hip heights should be measured according to Beef Improvement Federation Guidelines. The animal should stand on a flat, level surface and the measurement be taken directly over the hip bones (hooks).

There are several methods to collect hip heights. The most common method is a hip height stick with a level attached to insure proper angle of the stick. The stick has measurements on the side that are easily read when the bar is slid firmly on top of the animal.

However, most producers don't have available intricate chutes for measurement purposes. A simple, quick hip height measurement method such as a piece of plywood or paneling attached to the side of a scale or alley can be just as effective. The side of a scale is a convenient location, as the person gathering the weights can also collect the hip height measurement simply by looking over the hook bones when the animal is standing in a natural position on the scale. The scale is a good place to collect the measurement as it usually a

flat, level surface and animals are generally calm as their head is not being restrained.

Body Condition Scores (BCS)

BCS is designed to indicate the relative amount of body fat in the animal. A numeric system (1-9) is used to evaluate body condition. A BCS 1 would be thinnest; BCS 9 fattest. Optimum body condition scores are generally in the 5-6 range.

A BCS 1 animal is severely emaciated. Tail-head and ribs are prominent and the animal appears weakened. No fat can be palpated over the ribs, spinous processes or hip bones. A BCS 1 animal is near death.

A BCS 5 cow is considered moderate in condition. The cow is generally in good overall appearance. The last two or three ribs in some cases can be seen and some fat is apparent in the brisket, over the ribs and around the tail-head. Upon palpation, fat cover over the ribs feels spongy, and fat around the tail-head can be felt as well.

A BCS 9 cow is considered very obese, with large deposits of fat in the udder, around the tail-head, over the ribs and in the brisket. Bone structure is not visible and cannot be palpated over the hooks and ribs. The cow appears blocky and mobility may be impaired due to excess fat. These animals are rarely seen.

Many operations have cows that will weight 1,200 pounds. Some of these cows may be frame score 4s and some may be frame score 6x. Part of these differences may be due to variations in muscling; however, differences in condition have been found to be a large contributor to variation in weight. Hence, the importance of collecting body condition scores to characterize these weight differences is apparent.

The BCS can either be collected by the person running the scale or collected at the chute during vaccination or palpation. Collection of BCS also allows producers to have a better understanding of the nutritional status of the cow herd. Upon evaluation of the herd as a group, all cows may seem to be in adequate condition. However, when individuals are looked at, often times the younger cows or the higher producing cows will be in thinner condition. These cows may be sorted off from the others and offered additional energy sources if their condition warrants such a practice. This may be cheaper than offering additional supplemental feed to all cows.

ASA has several sources of information available for breeders wishing to collect these measurements, including brochures and a videotape, which explain the procedure of assigning body condition scores in more detail. Contact ASA for more information.