

Keeping livestock “just right” through the winter...

“Most of us like our animals fluffy.” This comment came from an experienced Extension Agent, now retired. She was referring to animal body condition, a way of assessing how fat or how thin an animal may be. For livestock producers, there are few practices more important than developing an eye that recognizes what is too fat, too thin, or “just right” in their livestock! An animal that maintains their current weight is an animal with nutrient needs properly met.



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This monitoring is always important but particularly so with winter’s rapid approach. In our temperature-controlled homes and offices we may not realize how environmental weather conditions impact us, but for animals in the outdoors, weather has a tremendous effect on nutrient requirements and consequently weight gain or loss.

Consider for a moment Tennessee’s weather swings, particularly in the winter. As I write this column, we are in the middle of one of those swings. Rain has moved in, the wind has been blowing, and now we are experiencing dramatically falling temperatures. These three things increase animal nutrient needs in the winter: wind (think of how it makes temperatures feel colder), temperature (the colder the temperature, the more calories needed to keep an animal warm), and wet. When these three factors combine, animal energy needs increase as dramatically as the weather has changed! With rapidly changing weather and resulting change in nutrient needs, savvy livestock producers carefully monitor animal body condition to make sure the feeding program is matching those environmentally-produced needs.

Fortunately for livestock producers, a system called Body Condition Scoring has been developed for most species of livestock. Specific to each species, this system combines a written description and picture of animals in various stages of condition (think thin, fat, and in-between). By comparing the examples with the animal in front of us, the eye can be trained to quickly assess how animals are doing. There are even recommended levels of BCS based on the animal’s current situation. For example, we recommend keeping mature beef cattle in a BCS minimum score of 5 prior to calving. For the first-calf heifer, we recommend a minimum BCS score of 6 at calving. Why? Because she is also growing and will have higher nutrient requirements than the mature cow. The extra bit of condition can act as a buffer for her nutrient needs.

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To make it even more convenient, there are apps for this. The apps, many of which are free, have pictures of animals in each BCS score and some even have the capability of adding pictures of animals to the app. These photos of animals can be compared from month to month to prevent wondering if one looks a little thinner than last month. Compare present condition with last month's picture and the answer is known.

Whether you like your animals fluffy or just right, understanding and using body condition scoring is the ideal way to keep them where they need to be. For additional information and or resource information, please call Rebekah Norman at your Rutherford County UT/TSU Extension office, 615-898-7710.