Learn to Score
Body Condition
Step by Step

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Adapted from the 1997 Elanco Animal Health publication, "Body Condition Scoring In Dairy Cattle."
Introduction

• The following is a step by step guide to help you learn to assign body condition scores (BCS) based on the process described by Ferguson et al., 1994.

• Scorers using this method will be able to assign BCS consistently and accurately.

• This system will teach you to evaluate specific areas of the pelvis and loin in an orderly fashion.

• Scores range from 1 to 5 in increments of 0.25.

• This system concentrates on accurately assigning scores from 2.5 to 4.0.
• Scores outside of this range are extreme and indicate serious problems.
  – For example, the difference between a 4.75 and a 5.0 is insignificant, both cows are seriously over-conditioned and prone to the same metabolic problems.
  – We would not base management decisions on the differences between these scores.
  – The same is probably true of two cows scoring 1.5 and 1.75; both are seriously under-conditioned.
• Even with a structured system such as this, some cows will fall between the categories described.

• In this case, scorers must decide which score best fits each cow.

• As you assign scores, it may be helpful to continue one step past the score you think the cow should receive.
  – This allows you a second opportunity to consider her final BCS.
• Before you learn the scoring process, let’s review the anatomical areas that are evaluated when assigning BCS.

• For dairy cows, BCS are based on evaluation of the pelvic area and the loin.
Side View

- Pins
- Thurl
- Hooks
- Short Ribs
Step 1 - Angle Between Hooks and Pins

• The first decision you make will divide cows into two groups: those with a BCS less than or equal to 3 and those with a BCS greater than 3.

• From the side view, evaluate the angle between the HOOKS and PINS, using the THURL as a reference point.
Angle Between Hooks and Pins

- Angle is a V
- Will be a 3 or less BCS
Angle Between Hooks and Pins

- Angle is a U
- BCS will be more than 3
• This decision may be the most difficult one in the BCS process, especially if the cow is near a 3.0 or 3.25 BCS.
• If the difference between a U and a V is not clear, move to the rear and observe the same angle between the hooks and pins.
• In addition, evaluate the angularity of the hooks and pins. Cows with sharp, angular hooks and pins will likely score 3 or less. Cows with round, fat-covered hooks and pins will likely score above 3.
Angular Cow, V-Angle
Rounded Cow, U-Angle
More Practice

• Since this first decision can be a little difficult, here are a few more examples.

• Once you have looked at each cow, you can advance to see the answer.
Cows with V-Angle – 3.0 or Less

• Now let's refine your score of "3 or less," starting with an evaluation of the HOOKS.

• Are they round or angular?
Rounded Hooks

- Hooks round
- BCS = 3.0
Angular Hooks

- Hooks angular
- Will score 2.75 or less
Check Point

• If these steps don't seem to fit the cow you are scoring, try going through the steps for cows with a U-angle between the hooks and pins.
Cows with Angular Hooks – 2.75 or Less

• Now let's refine your score of "2.75 or less," by evaluating the PINS.

• Are they padded or angular?
Padded Pins

• Pins visibly padded

• BCS = 2.75
Angular Pins

- Angular pins
- Will score below 2.75
Feel Pins for Fat Pad

• Now let's refine your score of "less than 2.75," by evaluating the PINS more closely.

• Can you feel a fat pad on the point of the pins (a palpable fat pad)?
Palpable Fat Pad on Pins

- Fat pad present
- BCS = 2.5
No Fat Pad on Pins

- No fat pad
- Will score below 2.5
Evaluate the Visibility of Short Ribs

• The final decision to refine your score of "less than 2.5," requires a close look at the SHORT RIBS and SPINE.

• Look for the boney ridges of the short ribs.

• Estimate the distance that these ridges are easily seen from the tip of the short ribs to the spine.

• Are the ridges visible half of the distance, three-fourths of the distance, more?
Visible 1/2 the distance

- Ribs visible halfway to the spine
- BCS = 2.25
Visible 3/4 the distance

- Ribs visible three-fourths of the distance to the spine

- BCS = 2.0
Saw-tooth Spine & Ribs, Prominent Thurl

- Will score below 2.0

- Cows scored below 2.0 are severely thin and would be managed similarly, regardless of their exact BCS.

Photo not available
Cows with a U-Angle – Score over 3

- Now let's refine your score of "over 3," starting with an evaluation of the TAILHEAD and SACRAL LIGAMENTS.
- The tailhead ligament is found between the tailhead and the pins.
- The sacral ligament is found between the spine and the hooks.
- The visibility of these ligaments will help you score cows with more condition.
- Which ligaments can you see?
Sacral Visible Tailhead Visible

- Both ligaments easily seen
- BCS = 3.25
Sacral Visible
Tailhead Barely Visible

• Tailhead ligament partly covered in fat

• BCS = 3.50
Sacral Barely Visible
Tailhead Not Visible

- Neither ligament easily seen

- BCS = 3.75
Sacral Not Visible
Tailhead Not Visible

- Neither ligament visible
- Will score 4.0 or more
Check Point

• If none of these descriptions fit the cow you are scoring, try going through the steps for cows with a V-angle between the hooks and pins.
Scores Greater than 4.0

• Now let's refine your score of "over 4," by evaluating the THURL, SHORT RIBS, PINS, and HOOKS.

• The score will increase as more of these parts are covered with fat.

• Which parts can you see?
Thurl Flat
Short Ribs Visible

- Area between hooks and pins filled with fat
- Tips of short ribs visible
- BCS = 4.0
Thurl Flat
Short Ribs Barely Visible

- Area between hooks and pins filled with fat
- Tips of short ribs barely visible
- BCS = 4.25
Thurl Flat
Pins Not Visible

- Area between hooks and pins filled with fat
- Tips of short ribs not visible
- Pins not visible
- BCS = 4.5
Hooks Barely Visible

- Area between hooks and pins filled with fat
- Tips of short ribs not visible
- Pins and hooks not visible
- BCS = 4.75

Photo not available
All Boney Prominences Well Rounded & Fat Covered

- No bones visible
- BCS = 5.0