

BODY CONDITION SCORING: SHEEP



BASICS

OVERVIEW

Body condition scoring (BCS) is a subjective technique of evaluating animals based on their relative proportions of muscle and fat stores. It is an important management tool used by producers to help optimize production, assess health, and evaluate nutritional status.

SYSTEMS AFFECTED

- Musculoskeletal
- Nutritional
- Production management

BODY CONDITION SCORES: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CAUTION

- Sheep have a great variability of body type and conformation, therefore weight alone is not a good indicator of body condition
- Changes in BCS can alert you to individual animal or flock level health problems
- BCS can provide you with a good indication of the health, nutritional state, and potential reproductive success of the flock
- BCS is a good management tool to evaluate if the nutritional demands required by specific physiologic situations (particularly lactation and late pregnancy) are being met
- Age, pregnancy status, and wool coat are a few of the variables that can affect the outcome or interpretation of BCS

BCS Technique

- Palpate over the lumbar (loin) areas to feel the spinous and transverse processes and evaluate presence or absence of depression and its depth or roundness.
- Inspect and palpate the paralumbar fossa and evaluate the depth of the shelf created by the transverse process of the lumbar vertebrae.

Body Condition Scores

- Scores are given from 1 (emaciated) to 5 (obese)
- Since 90% of sheep should have a BCS of 2,3, or 4, it is generally recommended to use half scores between BCS 2 and 4
- Optimal condition scores for various stages of production

Production Stage	BCS
Breeding	3-4
Mid Gestation	2.5-4
Lambing	3-4
Weaning	2+

BCS 1: Emaciated

- Spinous processes are sharp and prominent and can be felt with little pressure
- Loin eye muscle is very shallow with no fat cover
- Transverse processes are prominent and fingers easily pass under ends when palpated

BCS 2: Thin

- Spinous processes are prominent but smooth and can be felt with little pressure
- Loin eye muscle has more depth and fullness, but there is no apparent fat cover
- Transverse processes are smooth and slightly rounded, fingers can pass under ends with little pressure

BCS 3: Average

- Spinous processes are smooth and rounded, moderate pressure needed to feel individual processes
- Loin eye muscle is full with a moderate degree of fat cover
- Transverse processes are smooth and well covered, firm pressure is needed to feel ends

BCS 4: Fat

- Spinous processes can be detected with firm pressure as a hard line
- Loin eye muscle is full with a thick covering of fat
- Transverse processes cannot be felt

BCS 5: Obese

- Spinous processes cannot be detected; fat dimple where processes would normally be felt
- Loin eye muscle is very full with a very thick covering of fat
- Transverse processes cannot be felt
- May be large deposits of fat over tail head and rump



MISCELLANEOUS

PREGNANCY

Pregnancy may affect body condition scoring. Ewes in late gestation may appear heavier, and thus scored higher, due to size and location of fetus(es). Likewise, because of the high nutritional demands of the growing fetus(es), it is possible for ewes in late pregnancy to lose condition quickly if not fed appropriately.

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT

- Most critical time to assess BCS is 4-6 weeks pre-lambing and a month prior to breeding. This will allow for changes to be made to reach optimal BCS which will influence breeding outcomes and subsequent lamb crops.
- Ewes that lose too much condition during lactation should be separated from the flock and provided supplemental nutrition.
- Sheep that have difficulty maintaining condition may be culled as a means of reducing feed costs.

SEE ALSO

- Body condition scoring by species
- Ewe Flock Nutrition

ABBREVIATION

BCS = body condition score

SUGGESTED READING

Russel, A. 1991. Body condition scoring of sheep. In: E. Boden (Ed.) Sheep and Goat Practice. pg 3. Bailliere Tindall, Philadelphia

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