

Assessing a herd's body condition and using results



Body condition scoring is a visual assessment of the amount of fat and muscle covering the bones of a cow, regardless of body size. It is not affected by gut fill or pregnancy as liveweight is. In Australia, an 8 point scale is most commonly used for dairy cattle - 1 is extremely thin and 8 is extremely fat.

Assessing a cow's body condition score (BCS) provides a standardised measure of cows' energy (and protein) reserves at critical times during their lactation cycle, and tells you a lot about a herd's previous level of feeding, likely future productivity, and future feed requirements.

By scoring a representative sample of the whole herd or particular groups of cows, you can calculate an average herd body condition score and the proportion of cows that are too thin and too fat. This information is highly valuable when making herd nutritional management decisions.

For seasonal / split calving herds, the easiest way to record body condition scores and interpret results is with Dairy Australia's **cow body condition scoring smartphone app**.

- › It uses a simple 2 step "hands off" scoring method with large graphics and photos provided for each score
- › It can be used for multiple farms and cow groups at the most important stages of the annual lactation cycle
- › It offers a choice of 3 scoring methods to suit beginners, intermediate and advanced users
- › Herd results are provided instantly after each scoring event, with suggested actions to consider
- › You can enter your own comments with results of each scoring event
- › A results summary is emailed to you and anyone else you wish for your records
- › Automatic reminder can be set for when the next scoring event is due

Alternatively, for scoring seasonal/split herds or year-round calving herds, you can use a Dairy Australia **recording sheet**.

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Dairy Australia has also produced a **cow body condition scoring handbook** which is a complete guide to monitoring and managing a herd's body condition.

Visit dairyaustralia.com.au/BCS to download the app and recording sheets, and to download or order hard copies of the handbook.

The body condition targets, as presented by Dairy Australia's InCalf program, are:

At calving:

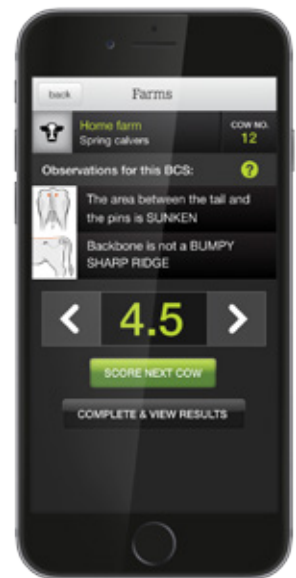
- > No more than 15% of cows below score 4.5
- > No more than 15% of cows above score 5.5

At mating:

- > No more than 0.6 decrease in average score of the herd since calving
- > No more than 15% of cows lose more than one score since calving
- > Cows maintain or gain body condition from commencement of mating

At drying-off:

- > Cows in desired condition score at calving
- > Cows maintain or gain body condition during the dry period



Body Condition Score (BCS) recording sheet

Dairy Australia
your levy at work

Farm: A. Smith Address: Jonesville Date(s): 18 / 6 / 13 to / /

Group	Spring calvers			Stage of lactation cycle			Drying-off		
	3	3.5	4	4.5	5	5.5	6	6.5+	
No. of cows	0	4	12	23	20	9	2	0	70 ^(A)
Total BCS	0	14	48	103.5	100	49.5	12	0	327 ^(B)
No. of cows below 4.5	16 ^(C)								2 ^(D)
% of cows below 4.5	23% ^{(E) (A x 100)}			Average BCS of herd:					3% ^{(F) (A x 100)}
				4.67 ^(B/A)					

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For information on body condition scoring for herd management, visit www.dairyaustralia.com.au/BCS

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A herd's range in body condition score is as important as its average score. We need to know what proportion of cows are too thin and too fat, as these cows are likely to have reduced reproductive performance and milk production, and increased risk to their health and welfare.

If a herd's BCS results at a particular time during the lactation cycle are found to be outside the targets recommended above at calving and mating, immediate actions to improve the herd's BCS profile and its subsequent herd reproductive performance should be considered. Actions to prevent the same problem occurring again next year should also be considered. See *table 1*.

Table 1 Actions to consider if a herd's BCS results are off target

BCS results	Actions to consider	
	Immediately	To prevent it happening again
At 8–10 weeks before drying-off (seasonal/split calving herds) or at drying-off (year-round calving herds)		
More than 15% of cows are below BCS 4.5	If possible, increase feed inputs in late lactation and during the dry period. Target all cows or just cows below score 4.5 if you can preferentially feed.	Seek help from an adviser to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine the costs and benefits of increasing feed inputs during mid-late lactation. Determine if reducing stocking rate is appropriate. Check that all cows have equal access to feed. If most thin cows are first calvers, then review management of heifers.
More than 15% of cows are above BCS 5.5	Feed to maintain condition during dry period. Don't allow over-conditioned cows to lose condition when dry.	Seek help from an adviser to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check diet fed throughout lactation if most fat cows have been calved less than 10–12 months. Determine if cows are being overfed in mid-late lactation.
Just before calving		
More than 15% of cows are below BCS 4.5	If possible, separate thin cows into a group before and for several weeks after calving and preferentially feed.	Increase body condition in late lactation. Maintain condition during dry period. See actions above for when there are too many thin cows at drying-off.
More than 15% of cows are above 5.5 BCS	Monitor fat cows closely for health problems, especially in first week after calving. If possible, separate fat cows into a group for several weeks after calving and preferentially feed to reduce the risk of excessive body condition loss in early lactation due to reduced appetite.	If less than 15% of cows were above BCS 5.5 at drying-off, then cows have been overfed during the dry period. Reduce the amount fed to dry cows in the future.
Early lactation (2 weeks before mating start date in seasonal/split calving herds, 40–60 days after calving in year-round calving herds)		
Average herd BCS has decreased by more than 0.6 since calving	Seek help from an adviser to examine the costs and benefits of increasing feed inputs to prevent any further losses in body condition.	Review pre-calving transition feeding program with help from an adviser. Consider increasing feed intakes to minimise body condition loss in early lactation.

Source: Adapted from Dairy Australia Cow body condition scoring handbook

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