

# EWE BODY CONDITION SCORING

SCOTT P. GREINER, PH.D.

EXTENSION ANIMAL SCIENTIST, SHEEP

VIRGINIA TECH

Body Condition Scores (BCS) are a practical management tool to be used in conjunction with nutritional and other management strategies to optimize production of the flock. Condition scores are subjective in nature and utilize a five point scoring system (1-5) to classify sheep according to body fatness. BCS can be determined by either visual appraisal in short-fleeced sheep, by palpation in sheep with significant fleece length, or a combination of the two. The five BCS are as follows and relate to the figure below:

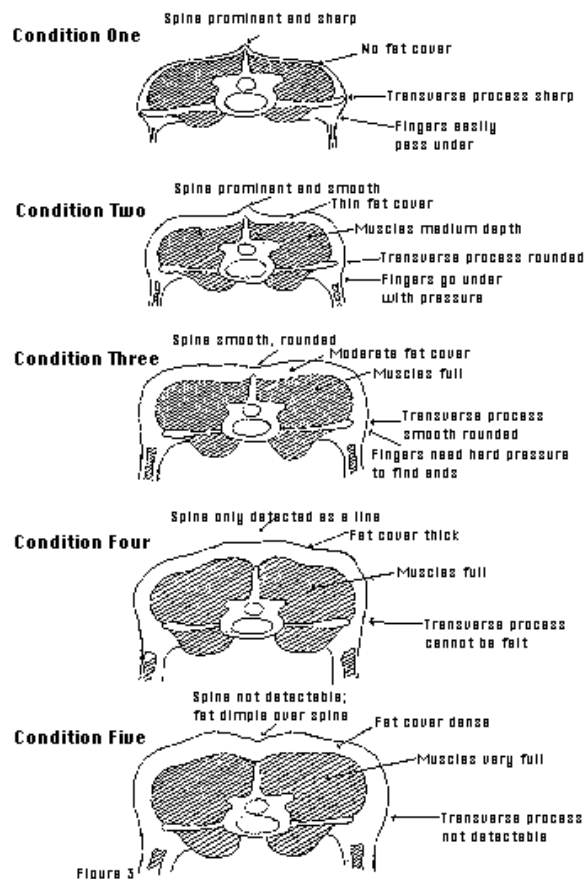
BCS 1- emaciated, very thin

BCS 2- this, "lean"

BCS 3- average, "nice shape"

BCS 4- fleshy, "bloomy", fat

BCS 5- obese, very fat



Using the above figure as a guide, ewes can be handled over the spine, loin and rib to assess BCS. Corresponding fat depots in the breast, crotch, and topline can also be visually estimated in sheep with minimal fleece. Most relevant is the ability of the shepherd's ability to relate BCS to optimum given the stage of production of the ewe and utilize this BCS to guide other management decisions and actions.

<u>Stage of Production</u>	<u>Optimum BCS</u>
Maintenance	2
Breeding	3
Early Gestation	2+
Late Gestation	3
Lambing	3+
Weaning	2

As shown above, optimized productivity is associated with differing BCS for various stages of production. Flushing is the practice of increasing energy intake, and therefore body condition, during the 10-14 days prior to breeding. This practice has been shown to be effective in increasing ovulation rates, and thereby increasing lambing percentage by 10-20%. The response to flushing is affected by several factors, including the body condition of the ewe. Ewes that are in lower body condition (2 or less) will respond most favorably to the increase in energy, whereas fat ewes (BCS 4-5) will show little if any response. by increasing dietary energy preceding and during breeding season.

Ewes should be in their best BCS at lambing. BCS 3+ is considered ideal, which provides the ewe adequate energy reserves to call upon during lactation. Additionally, ewes moving upward towards BCS 3+ the last third of gestation are less prone to metabolic disorders (ketosis, pregnancy disease) compared to excessively fat ewes or thin ewes which may have low lamb birth weights and lamb vigor. Furthermore, reducing BCS at improper time such as the last third of gestation frequently results in ketosis and poor lamb survival.

The most critical time to assess BCS and make use of it as a management tool is 4-6 weeks pre-lambing. Remember that ample time is needed to see results of nutritional changes. A second important time to assess BCS is a month prior to breeding. Application of BCS at this time will allow for changes to be made which can impact breeding success and percent lamb crop. While these two times are important, BCS is best utilized as an everyday assessment of the current status of the flock to help guide decisions.

Lastly, it is important to assess potential reasons for ewes with poor BCS at various stages of production. Poor/low BCS can be the result of inadequate nutrition or a variety of health issues (parasites, disease).

In summary, body condition scoring the ewe flock is an important aspect of total flock management. Efforts to provide adequate, cost-effective nutrition and management strategies rely on accurate use of BCS.