



Body Condition Scoring Cows

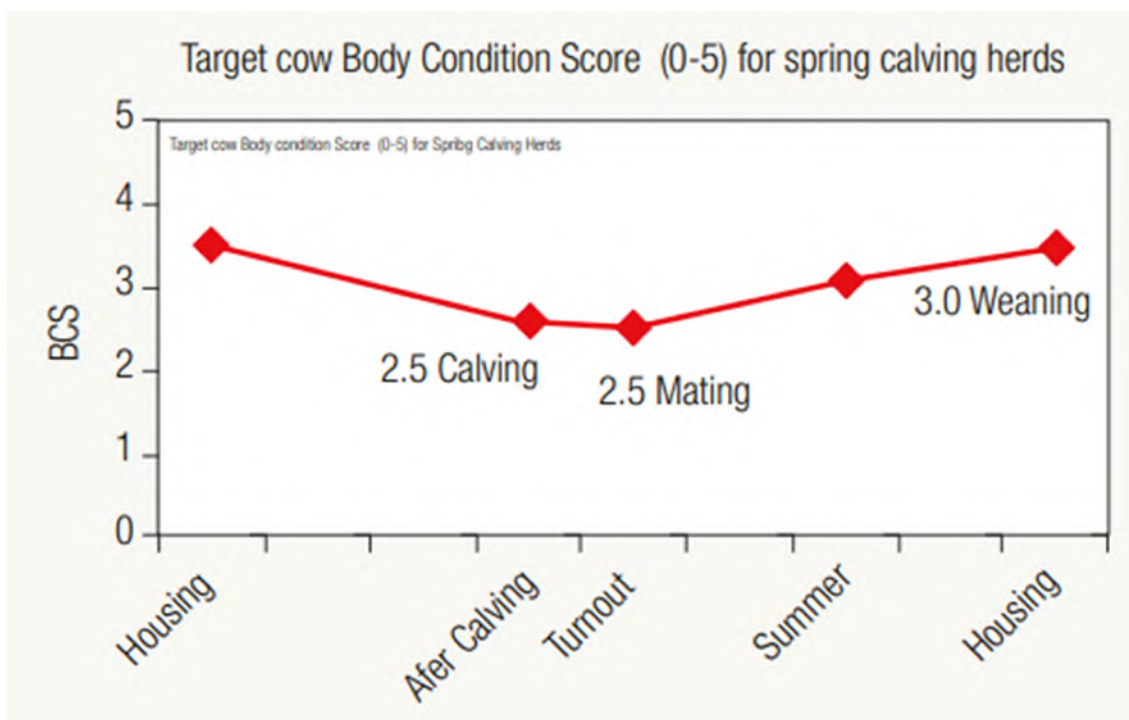
Body Condition Score (BCS) is a system used to assess the relative fatness or thinness of an animal, by assessing the animal's fat stores as described below. It is a key principle of successful suckler herds to first of all know what target body condition score (BCS) is required at different stages of the annual production cycle for suckler cows, and how that can be manipulated to optimise performance and minimise cost. On average, one BCS unit is equivalent to 70kg of body weight.

Table 1 shows the target BCS for different stages of the year. But what does that look like in practice?

The process of measuring body condition involves handling each of your cows and assessing how much fat cover they have in three particular body sites:

1. Over the ribs
2. Over the short Ribs – transverse processes
3. On the tail head, above the pin bones

Each area is scored on a 5 point scale as detailed below and it is the average cover across these three areas that gives you the final figure. For example, you may have a cow with reasonable cover over the ribs and little or none on the tail bone. Simply looking at a cow will not suffice – you need to get your hands (or at least your gloves) dirty!





	Spring Calving	Autumn Calving
Housing	3.0 – 3.5	2.5 – 3.0
At calving	2.5	3.0
At turnout	2.0+	2.0
At Breeding	2.5	2.5



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**How to body condition
score a suckler cow**

The 5 point Body Condition Scores scale

Score 1: Individual transverse processes sharp to the touch & no fat around tail head. Hip bones, tail head & ribs visually prominent.

Score 2: Transverse processes identified individually when touched, but feel rounded rather than sharp. Some tissue cover around tail head & over hip bones. Individual ribs no longer obvious, but easily felt when touched.

Score 3: Transverse processes can only be felt with firm pressure. Areas either side of tail head have fat cover that is felt easily.

Score 4: Fat cover around tail head evident as slight “rounds,” soft to touch. Transverse processes cannot be felt even with firm pressure. Folds of fat developing over ribs.

Score 5: Bone structure no longer noticeable, & animal presents a “blocky” appearance. Tail head & hip bones almost completely buried in fat, & folds of fat are apparent over ribs. Transverse processes are completely covered by fat, & animal’s mobility is impaired

Controlling Body Condition score around calving

Top Tips

- You need to fix any issues with BCS early – 75 - 80% of calf growth is in the last 3 months, cows should not be energy deficient in this time period.
- Over-fat cows have increased calving difficulty because fat is deposited in the pelvic area, thereby reducing the size of the pelvic canal. Over fat cows can also have reduced appetite after calving leading to greater BCS loss.



- Very thin cows also have increased calving problems (and increased calf mortality) due to insufficient strength to withstand the birth process and giving birth to weak, non-vigorous calves.
- First and second time calvers should be penned together away from mature cows, they are still growing and therefore have a higher energy demand, so they will be fed differently. They will be more timid and can be bullied by older cows. To maintain condition, they need to be able to reach the feed barrier easily and feed for as long as necessary.
- First and second time calvers may need to be supplemented before calving with soya, to improve colostrum quality. After calving they should be supplemented with 2kg of 18% protein concentrate if not going straight to grass. These animals are still growing, so they have to support their own growth while also feeding their calf.
- Test your silage – 65 DMD silage will maintain condition, if you have 68-70 DMD silage, this should be restricted to 30 – 35kg fresh weight to maintain condition, otherwise cows will gain condition.
- Research shows that cows in the correct body condition score at calving have an 80% chance of going back in calf during the first 42 days of the next calving season.

How?

- Body condition score all cows and heifers at housing
- Pen first and second calvers separately – feed for own growth, body condition and calf growth
- Pen thin cows, fat cows, and cows in correct condition separately
- Restrict fat cows based on silage analysis
- Feed thin cows, either 70 DMD silage or 65 DMD silage and 2Kg of meal until their condition reaches 2.75. Alternatively, calves can be weaned from thin cows earlier in the grazing season (e.g. September) and subsequently thin cows can gain condition using a cheaper feed resource
- Maintain cows in correct condition on a 65 – 67 DMD silage
- Monitor body condition on an ongoing basis
- Note that a measured BCS can drop 0.25 units between pre- calving to post-calving. Thus, a cow's BCS should be greater than 2.5 pre-calving to accommodate for this.
- Feed a good pre-calving mineral 4-6 weeks pre-calving as per manufacturer's instructions. Dry dairy cow minerals are very high spec, if feeding a dry dairy cow mineral, reduce the rate by 20%. If lime has been applied to silage ground, it may lead to high molybdenum content in the silage leading to copper being "locked" up. If lime has been applied, ensure there is protected copper included in your mineral.
- Once calved prioritise first and second time calvers to be turned out to high energy, high protein grass or receive 2Kg of high protein concentrate with good quality silage (70 % DMD +).
- If silage quality is poor and cows won't be turned out within two weeks, all cows should receive some concentrate to assist in bringing them back cycling.
- An increase of 21 days in the length of the calving period will reduce live weight gain by 20 – 25kg at weaning if your weaning is gaining 1.0 – 1.2Kg/day, valued €3.00 per Kg, that's €60 - €75. The cost of 2kg of meal for 3 weeks is €15, when concentrate costs €350/t. Net gain €45 - €60

 **Ensure adequate feed space**



Savings

- If your cows are in good condition at housing (e.g. 3.5) and silage needs to be restricted to lose $\frac{3}{4}$ of a condition score, this can save of 1 - 1.5 tonnes of silage, in 2024 this is worth €60 - €90 if you price a bale of silage at €45.

Body Condition Score 2.0



Score 2: Transverse processes identified individually when touched, but feel rounded rather than sharp. Some tissue cover around tail head & over hip bones. Individual ribs no longer obvious, but easily felt when touched.



Body Condition Score 3.0



Score 3: Transverse processes can only be felt with firm pressure. Areas either side of tail head have fat cover that is felt easily.



Body Condition Score 3.5



Score 3.5: Half way between score 3.0 and 4.0. You can't feel the rib easily, the transverse can only be felt with a lot of pressure, the fat around the tail head is becoming rounded.



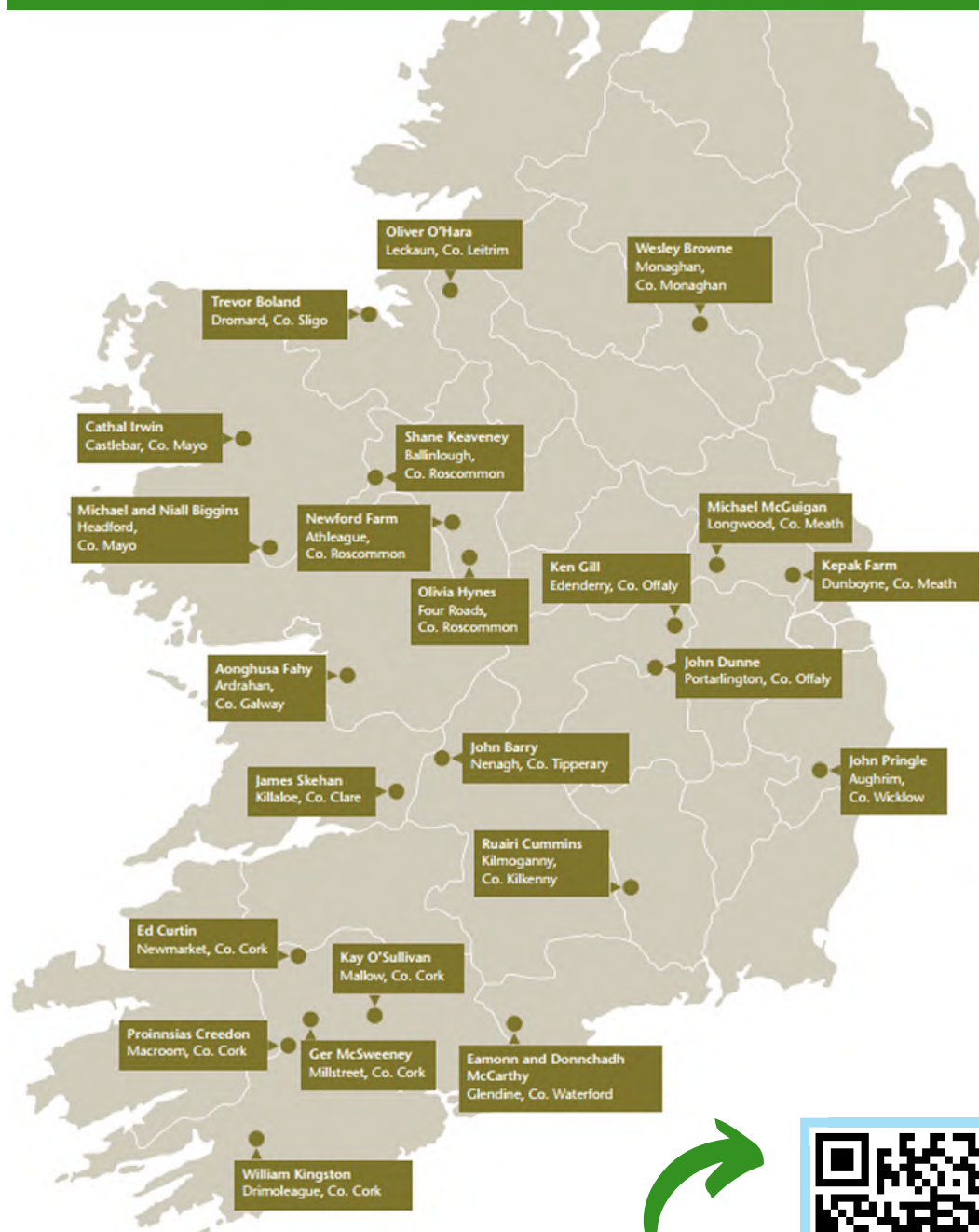
Body Condition Score 4.0+



Score 4: Fat cover around tail head evident as slight “rounds,” soft to touch. Transverse processes cannot be felt even with firm pressure. Folds of fat developing over ribs.



Teagasc Future Beef Programme Farms



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