

Condition Scoring

Feedstuffs invariably constitute the number one input cost for the sheep producer and the resulting nutritional status of the animal has dramatic influence on productivity. The goal of the producer should be to use the nutritional cost strategically in order to have the flock in the optimum condition that equates to their stage within the production cycle.

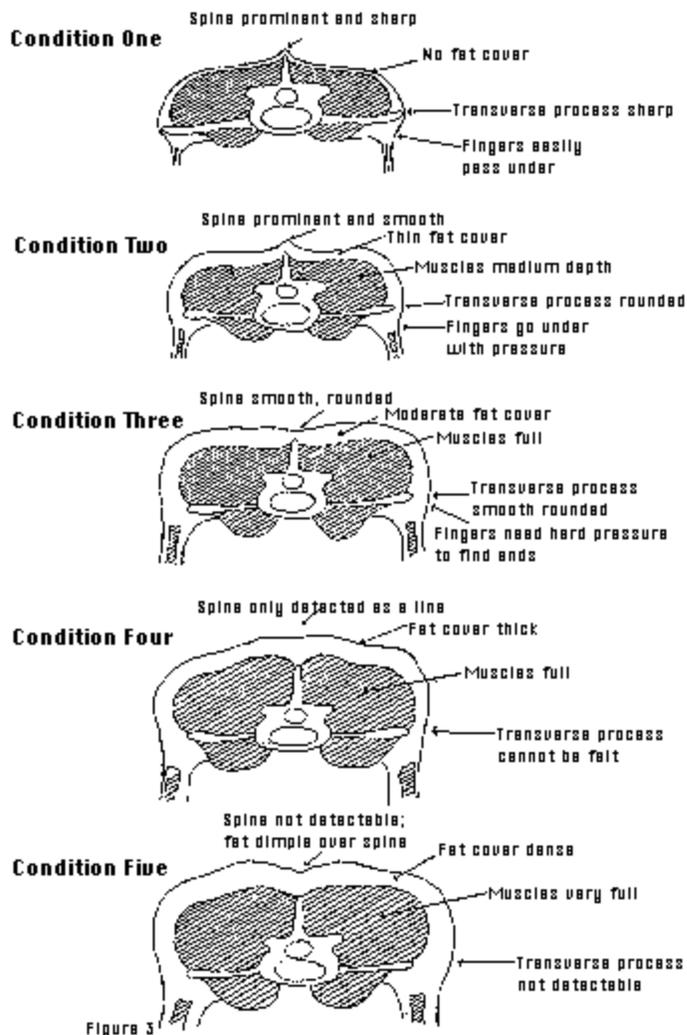
Condition scoring is the best method of assessing the nutritional state of an individual sheep or a flock. With most livestock species, a visual appraisal of the animal will provide a fairly accurate description of its nutritional state, “Gee that cow looks fat,” or “Wow, that horse looks skinny”. However, for a good part of the year most sheep are covered in wool which hides their body and can deceive a visual appraisal of their nutritional status, hence the need for a hands-on system of scoring. Using live weights alone does not give an accurate picture of the condition of the ewe. “Normal” liveweights can vary considerably between breeds and individuals. In pregnancy, a ewe may put on more than 15 kgs of body weight that constitutes fetus, amniotic fluid and tissues of pregnancy. While she may be gaining in weight, she may actually be diminishing her body stores of nutrition.



The loin of the sheep is the area along the spine between the last rib and the pelvis. Along the loin, the back bone consists of raised bumps and transverse processes (short ribs) which give the backbone the “wash board” feel. With condition scoring, the loin area is palpated and depending on the prominence of the spinal processes, the degree of fat and muscle covering is evaluated. The scores run from 1, an emaciated animal devoid of fat covering with the spinal processes sharp and prominent, to 5, an animal that is obese and even with firm pressure, and no spinal processes can be felt below the thick covering of subcutaneous fat. Half scores are also used.

Most producers are constantly, almost subconsciously scoring their ewes every chance they have to put a hand on them. However, condition scoring of the entire flock should be a management procedure done on a regular basis to prevent overfeeding or under feeding the flock. The producer should set target scores they want the sheep to be in at specific points of the production cycle.

At breeding, the ewe should be in the best condition of the year. The better condition will result in optimum ovulation and a large lamb crop. Ideally, the producer will target for scores of 3-4, with the ewes in a rising plane of nutrition. However, obese ewes with over-conditioned scores of 4-5 are a poor use of nutritional inputs and will actually have negative impacts on reproduction.



“Body Condition Scoring of Sheep” by Dr. Terry Boundy in *The Progressive Sheep Breeder*, pp. 22-24. Spring 1982 Shoreham Vermont.

After breeding and for the first 3 months of gestation, the nutrient requirements of sheep are at their lowest. Returning sheep to moderate condition scores of 2-3 will not have negative impacts on the pregnancy and may make economic sense. However, the growing fetus will make 75% of its growth in the last 4 weeks of pregnancy, so it is important to respond to this nutritional demand and bring the ewes back up to optimum scores of 3-4 when they lamb. Ewes that are too thin at lambing will give birth to small weak lambs and will not be able to produce the necessary quantity and quality of colostrum. Once a ewe enters the lactation phase of the production cycle they fall into a negative nutritional balance. If they are thin at lambing they will milk down to an extreme score. They may be very slow to recover from this low score and this may affect their subsequent production cycle. Conversely, ewes that are too fat at lambing will have more problems, giving birth to large lambs and they are more prone to metabolic diseases and prolapse.

The sheep flock should be scored and recorded 4 times a year. Remember that it takes time to rectify a nutritional problem. For a spring lambing flock, ewes should be evaluated 4 weeks before breeding, 4 weeks after breeding, 4 weeks before lambing and at weaning. Adjustments should be made accordingly to the whole flock feeding program and extreme scoring ewes should be separated and fed strategically. Ewes with extreme scores from the flock average should be further evaluated to determine if the extreme score is due to non-nutritional causes. Extremely thin ewes may be suffering from parasitism, bad teeth or other health problems. Unusually fat ewes may be barren or impaired in their milk production potential.

Target Body Condition Scores	
<i>Production Stage</i>	<i>Target Condition Score</i>
Dry Ewe	2.0-2.5
Breeding	3.5-4.0
Lambing	3.5-4.0
Weaning	2.0-2.5

Don't forget the rams! At breeding, the rams should be in the same condition as the ewes for optimum performance. Once the ram begins the tup he will hopefully spend his time seeking and breeding ewes and will lose condition so he will need some reserves. However, an obese ram will exhaust easily and be more reluctant to mount. The extra weight will put strain on his feet and legs and will put that much more of a stress on the ewe during breeding. During the non-breeding season, the rams should be maintained in moderate scores.

A few years ago a producer discussed a problem he was having. The ewes were lambing and they were all having big single lambs and a lot of lambing problems. After talking with him we discovered he had not scored his ewes at breeding and they were likely thin and conceived only with the single lambs. Then, a few weeks before lambing, when the ewes were finally scored and found to be thin, he had started heavy feeding which resulted in the single lambs being overly large. Don't make the same mistake. Score your flock on a regular basis in order to maximize production and efficiency.

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