Body Condition Scoring Guidance

Corresponds with AW1.3

Introduction

The RWS requires that the body condition of sheep is routinely monitored and recorded as part of the farm's management system to confirm health of the sheep. This document provides guidance on how to conduct Body Condition Scoring of sheep. The assessment guidance is also applicable to RWS auditors.

Description

Body condition scoring is a standardized method to estimate the amount of fat on a sheep's body. The body condition score measures the balance between intake and expenditure of energy, and is known to be related to feeding motivation. Body condition can be affected by a variety of factors such as food availability, reproductive or productive status, weather conditions, parasites, dental problems, diseases and feeding practices.

How to assess (individual)

Although it may be possible to get some idea of Body Condition by visual assessment of a sheep that is not in wool, the most accurate assessment requires sheep to be handled. Body Condition Score (BCS) should be assessed in a restrained sheep in a race. Body condition is assessed by palpation of the spine in the lumber region just after the last rib. Feel for the horizontal and vertical processes, and assess the amount of fat and muscle overlying the bones.

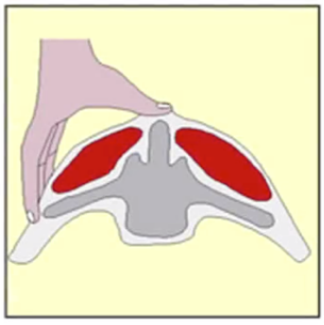


Illustration from Beef and Lamb New Zealand

There are several videos available online demonstrating how to carry out BCS.

How to condition score a ewe (Beef and Lamb New Zealand):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2_27XYEUOo&index=6&list=PL9ZU9GuQ1pFZhnvT4Wy1aBcxUI4cy09-n

Body Condition Scoring Demo (Beef and Lamb New Zealand):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrWQJ7B-ZMQ

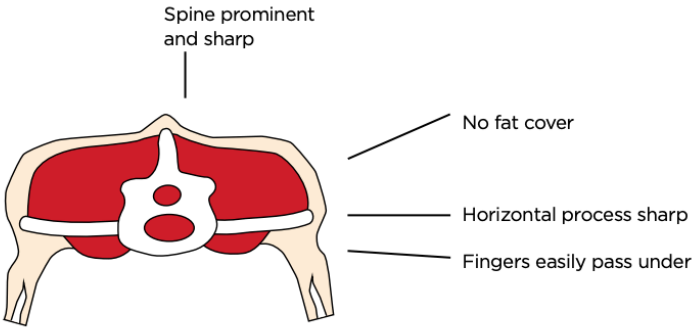
How to condition score sheep (DAFWA) (YouTube):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1F5V-GcG1Qk

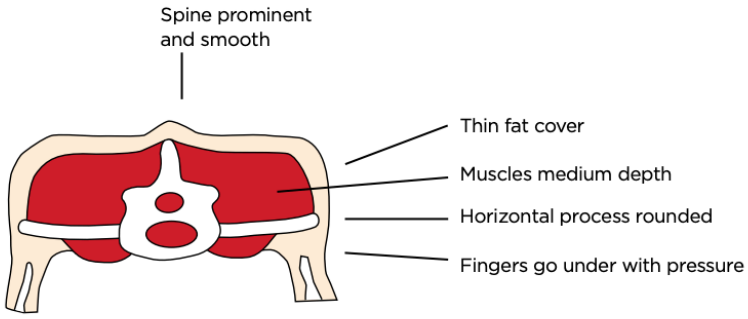
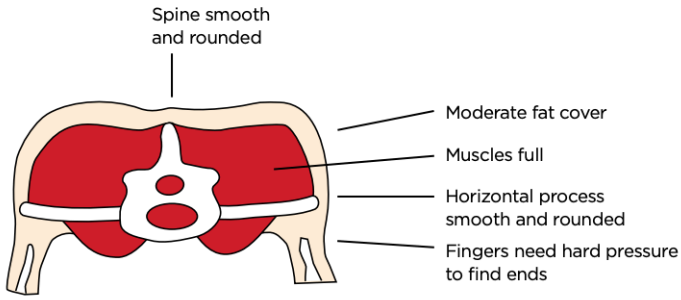
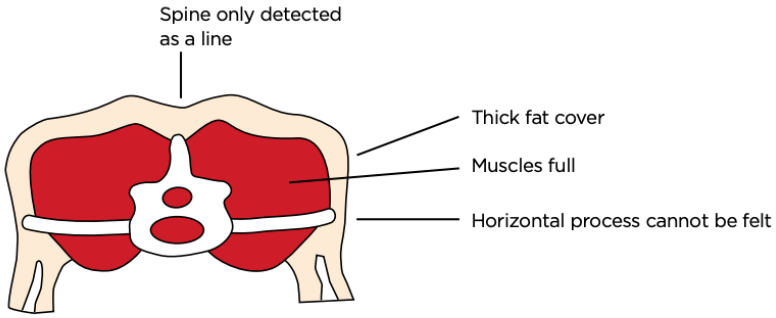
How to assess (flock)

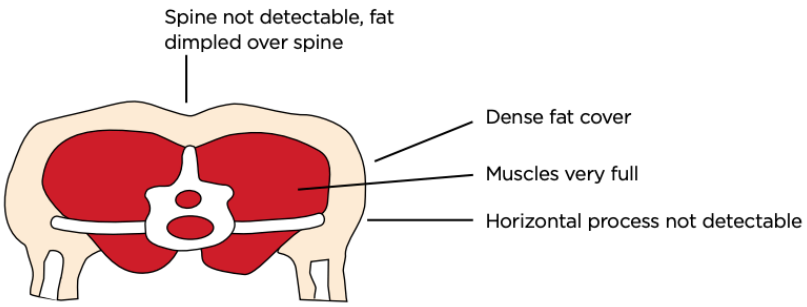
Randomly draft 25-50 sheep into a race or choose a random group from the middle of the flock. A couple of animals from each race when carrying out drenching or other animal husbandry tasks can also be selected. The animal should be standing in a relaxed position and should not be tense or crushed by other animals. Each assessment should only take a matter of seconds.

How to score

The BCS described by Russell et al. (1969, J Agric Sci, 72, 451-454) can be used. For welfare purposes animals are considered thin if they score below 2.0 on this scale, emaciated if they are at or below 1.0, and fat if they are above 4.0. This system is used for all sheep breeds and all purposes of use.

Score 1	 The spinous and transverse processes are prominent and sharp. The fingers can be pushed easily below the transverse bone and each process can be felt. The loin is thin with no fat cover.

Score 2	 The spinous processes are prominent but smooth, individual processes being felt only as corrugations. The transverse processes are smooth and rounded, but it is still possible to press fingers underneath. The loin muscle is a moderate depth but with little fat cover.
Score 3	 The spinous processes are smooth and rounded; the bone is only felt with pressure. The transverse processes are also smooth and well-covered, hard pressure is required with the fingers to find the ends. The loin muscle is full and with moderate fat cover.
Score 4	

	The spinous processes are only detectable as a line. The ends of the transverse processes cannot be felt. The loin muscles are full and rounded and have a thick covering of fat.
Score 5	 The spinous and transverse processes cannot be detected even with pressure; there is a dimple in the fat layers where the processes should be. The loin muscles are very full and covered with very thick fat.

Key scores

Optimum BCS will vary across the production cycle and breed of sheep used, but in general ewes that score between 2.5 and 3.5 will provide the optimum production and profitability. Low (<2) and high (>4) BCS have the potential to negatively impact production factors such as ovulation rate, embryonic loss, conception rates and return to service and also carry a higher risk of pregnancy toxemia. Ewes that are too thin (<2.5) will have poor production, increased risk of mortality and poor reproduction. No sheep should score less than 2 without action being taken. The recommended BCS for different production stages are as follows:

- Breeding BCS 2.5 to 3.5
- Early pregnancy maintain BCS at 2.5 to 3.5
- Lambing BCS 2.5 to 3.0, with an absolute minimum of 2.0
- Weaning BCS minimum 2.0.

How often to assess BCS

AW1.3 requires that sheep are routinely monitored for BCS. It is recommended that sheep have their BCS assessed at least three times during the production cycle, for example as follows:

- When lambs are weaned; to allow for ewes to be managed appropriately for the expected gain in BCS in the run up to breeding.
- In mid-pregnancy, at least for ewes bearing multiple lambs, to allow for any adjustment in feeding for ewes in poor condition prior to the period of increased nutritional need in late pregnancy.
- Prior to lambing so that ewes of lower BCS can be offered supplemental feed in lactation if necessary.

How to record BCS

A random sample from the flock can be used to get an average condition score that can be used to help inform decision making. A simple chart (see example below) can be used to record the BCS of a group and any shifts that occurs between recording sessions. Record the body condition of each sheep with an X on the chart. The median score of the flock is the score at the middle of the distribution. A printable chart is available in the Records section.

				X				
				X				
			X	X				
			X	X				
		X	X	X	X			