

TOO FAT OR TOO THIN —

What is the right

*By Lindsay Taylor
and Dallas Mount*

Do you pack on a few pounds in the winter months? What about your horses and cattle?

Under that thick winter coat, how can you tell if your livestock are too fat or too thin?

Knowing how to evaluate an animal's condition and then altering its diet to either add or remove body fat is a necessary part of being a skilled animal owner.

Why is it important to keep animals in the right body condition? Animals that are too fat can have structural problems as well as other health-related issues. Obese cattle and horses can have additional problems giving birth and lactating and are wasting feed resources, a substantial concern during these times of high feed costs. Animals that are too thin may have a more difficult time keeping warm during those cold winter months, will likely have problems conceiving, giving birth and lactating, and can have a variety of health problems emerge.

So, how to tell when an animal is too fat or too thin? Animal scientists have developed systems to

determine body condition in many livestock species. Standard scoring systems, known as body condition scores (BCS), provide a uniform way to objectively measure the body condition of livestock. BCS looks at the deposition of fat in indicator areas. The way an animal puts on fat does not change much between individual animals or breeds of animal. For both horses and cattle, a scale of 1-9 is used. A score of 1 indicates too thin a body condition, while a score of 9 means the animal is extremely fat.

Horse BCS is evaluated by looking at six key areas on the animal: neck, withers, loin, tail head, ribs, and shoulder. Cattle are similar with their six key areas being the brisket, ribs, back, hip bone, tail head, and pin bones.

For both horses and cattle, a body condition score of 5-6 is the target range. For cattle, a body condition score 5 has the last two ribs easily distinguishable, and the tail head, hip bone, and pin bones are easily distinguishable and not rounded (see diagrams page 17). For horses, an animal with



condition for my horses and cattle?

a body condition of 5 will have ribs not easily distinguished but easily felt, withers appearing rounded over the spinous process (the top), and the shoulder and neck blending smoothly into the body. Moderately conditioned horses will not be obviously thin in the six key areas but will have only minimal amounts of fat deposited. Because cattle condition scores are more targeted at optimal production efficiency and their anatomy is different, moderately conditioned animals may have some of the key areas slightly visible, such as ribs and hip bones.

The complete horse BCS chart can be found in the Utah State University Extension publication at <http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/equine1-6-02.pdf>, and the complete cattle BCS table can be found in the North Dakota State University Extension Service publication at <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/ansci/beef/as1026w.htm>.

So, how do we manage body condition of

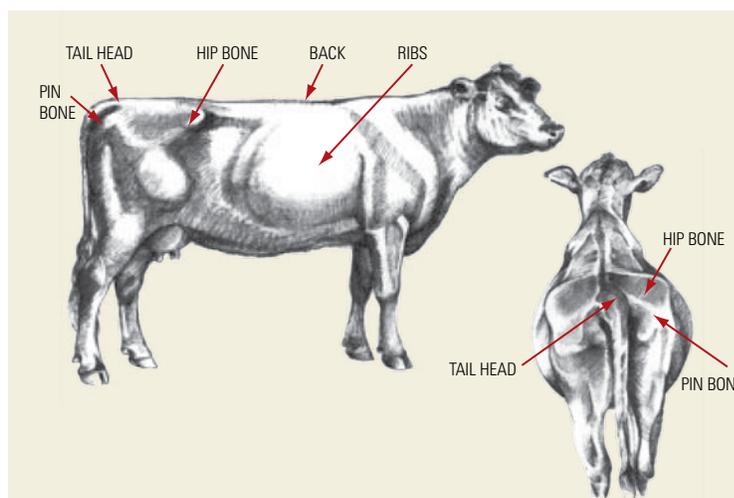
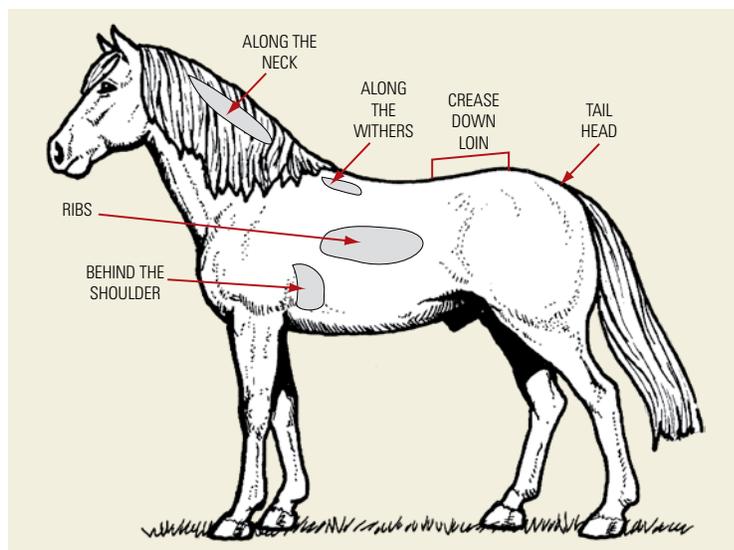
horses and cattle? The key is the amount of energy or calories in the diet. If animals are too fat, either switching to a feed with less energy or reducing the amount fed will reduce condition over time. Conversely, if animals are too thin, increasing the energy in the diet or feeding more if the animals can or will eat more should improve condition.

During very cold spells, nutritional requirements can increase 20 percent or more. For example, at minus 9 degrees Fahrenheit, cattle requirements will increase by as much as 40 percent. The less fat cover an animal has over its internal organs, the higher these additional nutritional requirements can be. Providing adequate shelter from Wyoming winds can help mitigate the effect of cold weather on livestock health and nutritional requirements; however, adequate body condition is still important to winter livestock health.

Making sure livestock have adequate body condition going into Wyoming's often sub-zero winter

weather is a key to optimum animal health. Added nutritional requirements due to a lack of body fat translates into higher winter feed costs, so it

is important for both the health of the animals and the health of pocketbooks that livestock go into the winter months with a moderate amount of body fat.



Lindsay Taylor is a University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service educator serving Campbell, Crook, and Weston counties, and Dallas Mount is an educator serving Goshen, Laramie, and Platte counties. Taylor can be reached at (307) 682-7281 or ltaylor25@uwyo.edu, and Mount can be reached at (307) 322-3667 or dmount@uwyo.edu.