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Introduction

- 1 In the 1970s in some units sows suffered from so-called 'Thin Sow Syndrome'. Sows entered the dry sow house in poor condition following weaning and were never able to regain condition before their next farrowing. They were in a downward spiral that, in many cases, led to premature culling.
- 2 Knowledge of sow nutrition has improved and such sows should now rarely be found. However, demands on sows in terms of litter size and weaning weights are increasing and vigilance is required to avoid the syndrome recurring.
- 3 This booklet is a reminder of how Condition Scoring can contribute significantly to good management of sows. A sow that is in the right condition at the right time will be healthy and productive. Condition scoring gives a clear indication as to whether the nutrition of the sow has been correct and also gives guidelines as to how to feed her in the future.
- 4 The technique links together three major factors:
 - good welfare
 - good husbandry and
 - good performance.

Why Condition Score?

- 5 The expectation of consistent high performance puts a heavy burden on the energy reserves of lean genotype sows. It is therefore very important that they build up fat cover before their first service in order to maintain good condition throughout their productive life. This creates a need to assess and monitor the condition of the individual sow and the herd to identify any adverse trends that may be occurring. It is important to use a system that is objective and which will give a score that can be written down on the sows' record cards. If a sow's condition is merely assessed by eye against that of her pen mates, the poor condition of an individual sow may be noted. However it is possible for the condition of the whole herd to decline gradually without being noticed.
- 6 Condition scoring aims to give guidelines to achieve adequate nutrition that minimises the risk of welfare problems in the sow. The technique has proved beneficial with today's leaner sows in ensuring that they enter the farrowing house with sufficient condition to rear strong healthy piglets.

How to Condition Score Pigs

- 7 Condition scoring is a hands-on technique: it is not sufficient just to examine the sow by eye, it is essential to feel the amount of fat she has covering her bones.
- 8 The main areas to feel are the hips or "aitch bones" and along the back bone.

It can also be useful to feel the two pointed bones either side of the tail, the "pin bones", and observe how much of a cavity there is, if any, under the base of the tail. The best way to feel is with the palm of the hand rather than with the fingers.

- 9 The Condition Scoring system for sows covers a five point scale.

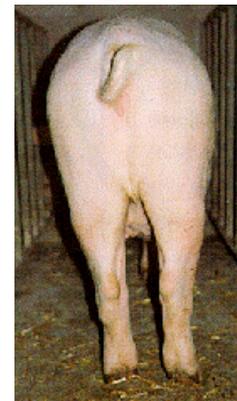
Score 1

The sow is visually thin, with hips and backbone very prominent and no fat cover over hips and backbone.



Score 2

The hip bones and backbone are easily felt without any pressure on the palms.



Score 3

It takes firm pressure with the palm to feel the hip bones and backbone.

Score 4

It is impossible to feel the bones at all even with pressure on the palm of the hands.

Score 5

The vertical processes are only detectable as a line; the ends of the horizontal processes cannot be felt. The loin muscles are full and have a thick covering of fat.

**Half Scores**

- 10 This scale of 5 points gives the full range of condition but it should be very rare to find sows in condition 1 or 5. (A sow in condition 1 could not be found to photograph for this booklet).
- 11 Once the technique has been practised, and is in use, it is permitted to use half points to indicate mid-point scores.
- 12 Although each of the scale points has a definite description, the system still has an element of subjectivity as different stock-people may score the same sow slightly differently within the half-point system. However the important point is to arrive at a consistency of scoring on the unit. Then use an external visitor, your vet or consultant, to check your scores to ensure you are somewhere "in line" with common practice.

When should Condition Scoring be used?

At weaning

- 13 It is very important to carry out condition scoring at weaning as this is the time when the sow is likely to be in her poorest condition. Condition at weaning can be very variable and may affect the subsequent weaning to oestrus interval.

Weaning weight of sows after 3rd litter (kg)	166	195
Backfat thickness of sows after 3rd litter (mm)	13.4	18.0
Weaning to oestrus interval (days)	12.1	6.0
Young et al., 1990		

- 14 Young sows (first and second parity) in very poor condition at weaning may be better mated on the second heat. Trials have shown that skipping a heat can improve litter size by approximately 2.6 pigs in the second and third litters.

At service

- 15 It is important to condition score at service even though it may be only a few days after weaning. Fat cover may have been lost during this short period especially in young sows that are still growing. Young growing sows mobilise fat reserves after weaning in favour of muscle deposition and their condition can quickly fall.
- 16 Checking sow condition at this point gives ample time for any condition that has been lost since farrowing and weaning to be regained before the next litter.

Mid pregnancy

- 17 Condition scoring at this point is a guide to the success of the chosen feeding strategy during pregnancy, either for the individual sow or for the herd as a whole. There is still time for any required changes in condition to be achieved before farrowing

At farrowing

- 18 The value of condition scoring at this time is arguable as it is too late to change the condition of sows if they are not on target. However, it is important to know whether the feeding strategy during pregnancy was successful in meeting the target condition required. If not, it should be reviewed for future pregnancies

Targets for Sow Condition

- 19 No matter how good the management and the feeding strategy for the herd, there will always be a cycle in the condition of the sows. Body condition lost during lactation needs to be regained during the following pregnancy. The objective of the feeding strategy during lactation should be to minimise fat loss. Feeding in pregnancy should not be so generous to allow the inefficient accumulation of excessive amounts of fat.
- 20 Sows should not enter the farrowing house with a condition score of less than 3. The target to be aimed at should be 3 and the sow should not get fatter than a condition score of 4. The condition of the sow may reduce to 2 during the lactation period but it is unacceptable for any sow to have a condition score of less than this.

Feeding & Management to Reach Set Targets

- 21 The major aim of the feeding and management strategy of the herd should be to minimise the loss of condition during lactation. To this end the sows should be given a high energy, high protein feed whilst they are suckling their piglets. Steps should be taken to ensure that the sow consumes adequate quantities of such high density rations.
- 22 Sows should not enter the farrowing house with a condition score of less than 3. The target to be aimed at should be 3 and the sow should not get fatter than a condition score of 4. The condition of the sow may reduce to 2 during the lactation period but it is unacceptable for any sow to have a condition score of less than this.
 - Ensure the temperature in the farrowing house is not too high for the sow. Enclosing the creep areas or the use of heat mats, may allow the house to be kept at a lower temperature;
 - Ensure an adequate supply of water for the sows, checking that flow rate is sufficient if nipple drinkers are used;
 - Restricting the feed intake of the sow in the first few days after farrowing will help to increase the maximum intake later in lactation when optimum milk yields are needed;
 - Feeding three times a day may enable greater feed intakes to be achieved.
- 23 These measures should ensure that feed intakes can be maximised.
- 24 If condition has been lost during lactation then the best time to replace it is during the early to middle part of the following pregnancy. There is conflicting scientific evidence on the effect of high levels of nutrient intakes during the first few weeks of pregnancy on embryo survival. It would appear to have detrimental effect in gilts but to have no effect in sows. Therefore thin sows can be given extra feed immediately after service. It is best to wait for at least 4 weeks after service before increasing the feed intake of gilts that require more fat cover.
- 25 If feed intakes are increased for sows in poor condition when they enter the dry sow accommodation then they should have regained condition by mid-pregnancy. If not, the increased feeding level should be continued.
- 26 If it is necessary to feed a sow an increased ration throughout pregnancy, this indicates that too much condition was lost in the last lactation. Alternatively, the increased level of feed in the early part of pregnancy was insufficient. High feeding levels in pregnancy can lead to low feed intakes in lactation and a further loss of condition. To break this cycle it may be necessary to skip a heat following weaning and feed *ad-libitum* to regain part of the lost condition before service. A significant proportion of the herd falling into the above category indicates that the general feeding and management strategy of the whole herd should be re-assessed, together with a check on environment control especially temperature in the dry sow house. Parasite control should also be carried out regularly on veterinary advice.

If you would like any further information or advice relating to this code please contact DEFRA's Animal Welfare Division on 020 7904 6512.

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