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Body condition scoring of sheep and goats

Farmnote 69/1994 [Reviewed July 2006]

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Summary

Condition scoring can be used to assess feed needs and to judge the carcass finish required by the buyer. The scoring techniques are described.

The condition and nutritional status of livestock can be measured by liveweight change and body condition scoring. Liveweight change, using liveweight scales, is the most accurate way of measuring the condition of livestock except during late pregnancy or when gut-fill varies between each weighing ?- see Farmnote No. 91/91 'Sheep weighing - why, which, when and with what!' (Agdex 430/26). At these times, condition scoring is a useful, additional method to liveweight change.

Where liveweight scales are not available, condition scoring is the best alternative. Visual appraisal is unreliable and is easily confused by gut-fill, length of fleece and pregnancy.

Condition scoring can be used:

- to assess whether more feed is needed to maintain or increase condition and liveweight; and
- in meat production systems where a particular carcass finish is desired by the consumer.

Carcass finish is assessed as a fat score which is directly related to the condition score of the live animal - carcass fat score 3 is equivalent to condition score 3. In both the sheep and goat meat industries body condition scores of 2 to 3 are desirable (well finished but not fat). Condition score 1 animals are unfinished; that is, muscle development is poor, while animals in condition scores 4 and 5 are overfat and unacceptable to all known markets.

Use of condition scoring

The condition scoring system was developed for sheep, but it can also be used with goats. Condition score 5 (very fat), which is occasionally seen in sheep, is rarely seen in goats.



Figure 1. Sheep cross-section at the 13th rib - condition score 2.

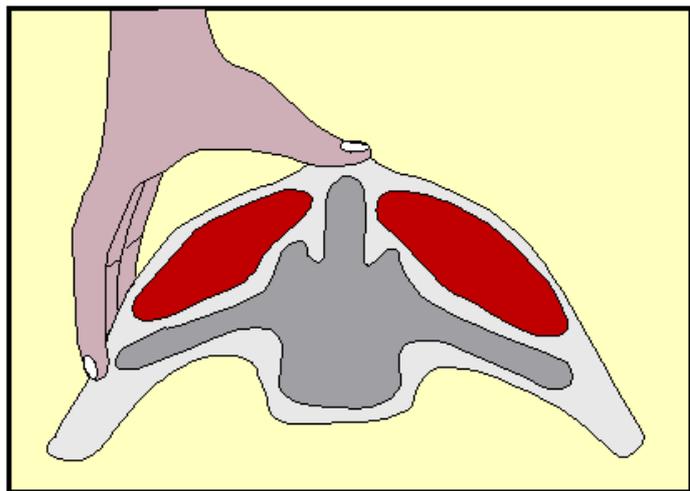


Figure 2. Sheep cross-section at the 13th rib - condition score 2

Condition scoring is done by feel. Accuracy improves with practice. When feeding for survival or for maintenance of body condition during periods of feed shortage, the livestock should be maintained at a condition score of 2. Below condition score 2, wool production in sheep is likely to be affected, with the development of tender fleeces. At condition score 1 or below the animal is emaciated and its long term production may be reduced. In the breeding ewe or doe, condition scores near 3 are desirable. Lower scores will result in less lambs or kids being born, lower birth weights and thus lower survival rates.

How to condition score

Condition score is independent of body size. Animals of Capretto goat size (small lambs) and of shipper wether size can have the same body condition score. Condition score measures the amount of soft tissue (meat and fat) over the bones of the animal ?- not of the size of the animal.

The animal should be standing in a relaxed position. It should not be tense, crushed by other animals or held in a crush. If the animal is tense it is not possible to feel the short ribs and get an accurate condition score.

Locate the last rib (the 13th). Using the balls of the fingers and thumb, try to feel the backbone with the thumb and the end of the short ribs with the finger tips immediately behind the last rib.

Feel the muscle and fat cover around the ends of the short ribs and over the backbone. Feel the fullness of the eye muscle ?- see diagram.

The degree of roundness of the ends of the bones, the amount of tissue between the bones and the fullness of the eye muscle determines the condition or finish of the animal ?- the condition score.

The condition scores

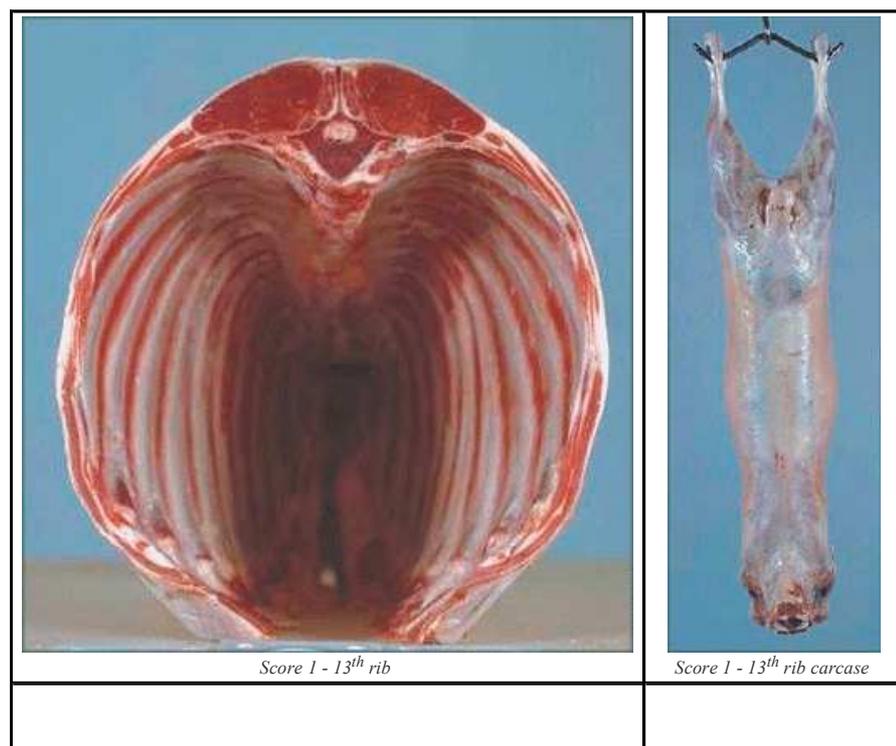
Score 0 - the animal is emaciated, in extremely poor condition and very weak (near death). The animal has no fat cover, the surface of the eye muscle feels hollow when the thumbs is run down from the backbone to the end of the short ribs and there is little tissue between the spinal processes of the backbone or short ribs.

Condition scores 1 to 5

Descriptions

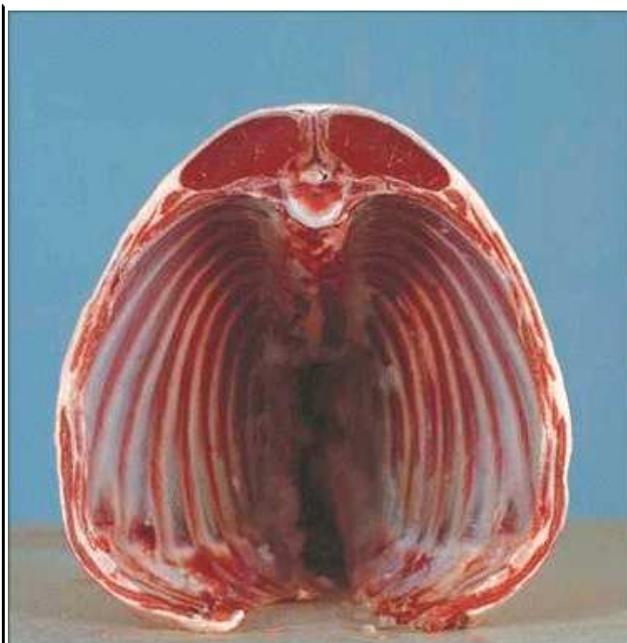
Score	Backbone	Short ribs	Eye muscle
1	Prominent and sharp	Ends are sharp and easy to press between, over and around	Thin, the surface tending to feel hollow
2	Prominent but smooth	Smooth well-rounded ends ?- can feel between, over and around each smoothly	Reasonable depth with the surface tending to feel flat
3	Can be felt but smooth and rounded	Ends are smooth and well covered ?- firm pressure necessary to feel under and between short ribs	Full and rounded
4	Detectable with pressure on the thumb	Individual short ribs can only be felt with firm pressure	Full with a covering layer of fat
5	Can be felt with firm pressure	Cannot be felt even with firm pressure	Muscle cannot be felt due to a thick layer of fat

Illustrations of carcasses and cross-sections at the 13th rib

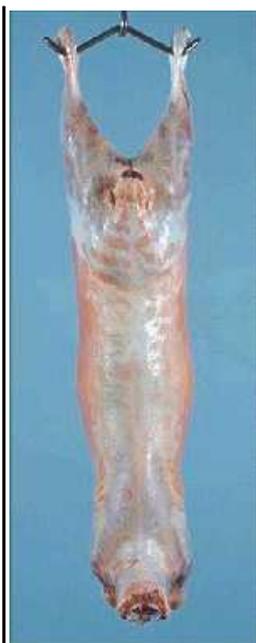


Score 1 - 13th rib

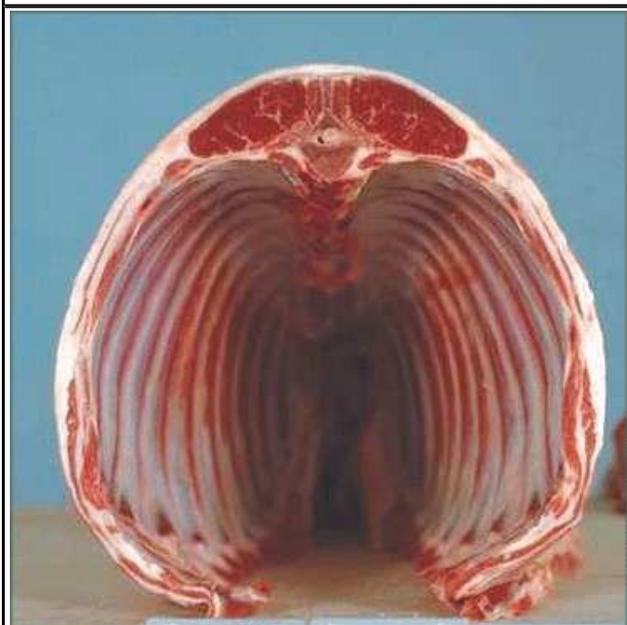
Score 1 - 13th rib carcass



Score 2 - 13th rib



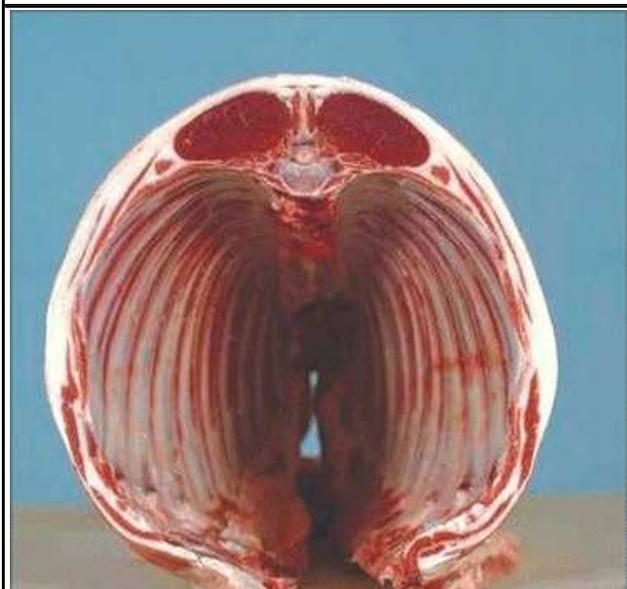
Score 2 - 13th rib carcass



Score 3 - 13th rib



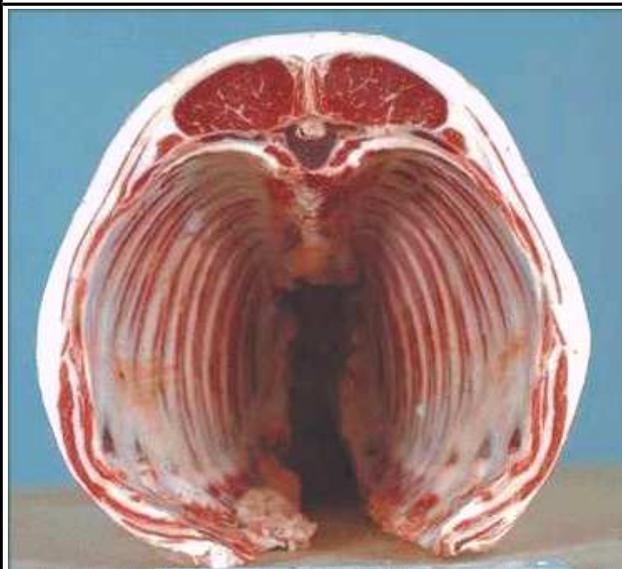
Score 3 - 13th rib carcass



Score 4 - 13th rib



Score 4 - 13th rib carcass



Score 5 - 13th rib



Score 5 - 13th rib carcass

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