Breeding -Body Condition

J-M. Luginbuhl, M H Poore, J P Mueller and J T Green

As the breeding season approaches, producers should be concerned with the body condition of their breeding does. Goat should not be allowed to become too thin or too fat. Failure in reproduction, low twinning rates and low weaning rates will result if does are too thin. Overly fat does can suffer pregnancy toxemia, but fat does are rarely a problem.

The term body condition refers to the fleshing of an animal. Because the greatest potential for goats is to graze them with beef cattle, we have devised a 1 to 9-point graduated scale, adapted from the beef system used in North Carolina. In that graduated scale, thin is 1 to 3, moderate is 4 to 6 and fat is 7 to 9. In most situations, goats should be in the range of 4 to 7. Scores of 1 to 3 indicate a problem, and scores of 8 to 9 are almost never seen in goats. The ideal body condition score (BCS) just before the breeding season is between a 5 and a 6 to maximize the number of kids born. Simply looking at an animal and assigning it a BCS can easily be misleading. Rather, animals should be touched. The easiest area to feel and touch to determine the body condition of an animal are the rib areas, on either side of the spine, by running a hand over those areas and pressing down with a few fingers. In doing so, one is able to determine the amount of fat covering the ribs. Other areas to monitor are the shoulders, the tail heads, the pins, the hooks, the edge of the loins and the backbone. Practice makes perfect, thus use your animals to get a feel for it. An easy way to start is to select a few animals that are over conditioned and some others that are thin in order to get a feel for extreme BCS. Then introduce a small group of animals and compare their BCS to the animals having extreme BCS. Producers should develop an eye and a touch for the condition of their animals and strive to maintain a moderate amount of condition on their goats. When body condition start to decrease, it is a sign that supplemental feed is needed or that animals should be moved to a higher quality pasture. Waiting until goats become thin to start improving their feeding regime may lead to large production losses. One should also be concerned with the body condition of the breeding bucks. If bucks are overfed and become too fat, they may have no desire to breed does.

Pregnant does should not have a body condition score of 7 or above toward the end of pregnancy because of the risk of pregnancy toxemia. In addition, a body condition score of 5 to 6 at kidding should not drop off to quickly during lactation.

Body condition score is also used to determine whether flushing will be of benefit to breeding does. Flushing means increasing the level of feed offered to breeding does, mostly energy, starting about one month prior to the introduction of the bucks, to increase body weight, ovulation rate and hopefully litter size. Increasing the level of energy offered to does should continue throughout the breeding season and for approximately 30 to 40 days after removing the bucks for adequate implantation of the fetuses in the uterus. Does in extremely good body condition (BCS = 7) will tend not to respond to flushing. On the other hand, does that are in relatively poor condition (BCS = 4 or lower) as a result of summer pastures of poor quality, high worm loads, late kidding of twins or triplets, will respond favorably to flushing by improving their body condition.

Flushing can be accomplished by moving breeding does to a lush nutritious pasture 3 to 4 weeks prior to the introduction of the bucks. This cost-effective flushing method is underutilized in the Southeast where forage is abundant. Another method is feeding ½ lb/day of a high energy supplement. Corn is the grain of choice for flushing; whole cottonseed is another low cost, high energy supplement. The goal being to increase the intake and body weight, breeding does should be grouped according to their BCS and fed accordingly to first improve their body condition, then to maintain it.