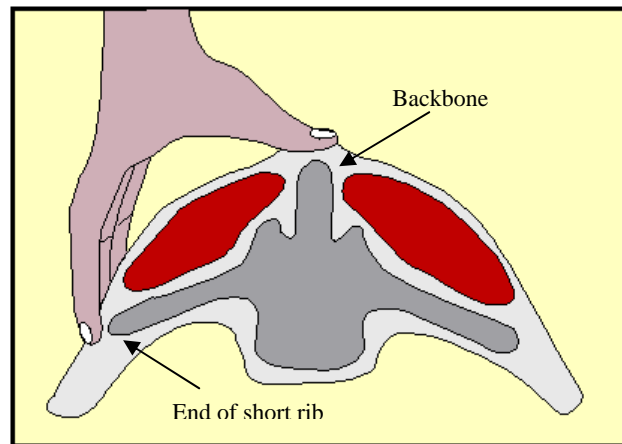


SHEEP

BODY CONDITION SCORING

While it is easy to see the body condition of your sheep when it is freshly shorn, it becomes impossible to do that by sight as the wool grows. A woolly sheep can easily look in a lot better condition than it actually is. Many hobby farmers are shocked at the poor condition of their sheep when they are shorn. This fact sheet will help you assess the body condition of your sheep and thereby maintain a good diet for it.



You will need to have the sheep penned so you can feel along the backbone and the ribs. 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. Place your thumb on the backbone just behind the last long rib and your fingers against the stubby ends of the short ribs.

Use the scoring system described below to assign a score. Many people use a system of half scores such as 2, 2.5, 3, 3.5 etc.

Score 1



Backbone

The bones form a sharp narrow ridge. Each vertebra can be easily felt as a bone under the skin. There is only a very small eye muscle. The sheep is emaciated and you have a serious animal welfare problem.

Short Ribs

The ends of the short ribs are very obvious. It is easy to feel the squarish shape of the ends. Using fingers spread 1 cm apart, it feels like the fingernail under the skin with practically no covering.

Score 2



Backbone

The bones form a narrow ridge but the points are rounded with muscle. It is easy to press between each bone. This is known as "store condition". The sheep is not in serious trouble, but you do need to improve its diet*.

Short Ribs

The ends of short ribs are well rounded but it is easy to press between them. Using fingers spread 0.5 cm apart, the ends feel rounded like finger ends. They are covered with flesh but it is easy to press under and between them.

Score 3



Backbone

The vertebrae are only slightly elevated above a full eye muscle. It is possible to feel each rounded bone but not to press between them. This sheep is in good condition.

Short Ribs

The ends of the short ribs are well rounded and filled with muscle. Using 4 fingers pressed tightly together, it is possible to feel the rounded ends but not between them. They are well covered and filled in with muscle.

Score 4



Backbone

It is possible to feel most vertebrae with pressure. The back bone is a smooth slightly raised ridge above full eye muscles and the skin floats over it. This sheep is in good condition, but you are overfeeding it a little.

Short Ribs

It is only possible to feel or sense one or two short ribs and only possible to press under them with difficulty. It feels like the side of the palm, where maybe one end can be sensed.

Score 5



Backbone

The spine may only be felt (if at all) by pressing down firmly between the fat covered eye muscles. A bustle of fat may appear over the tail. This sheep is seriously overweight and the diet needs to be modified.

Short Ribs

It is virtually impossible to feel under the ends as the triangle formed by the long ribs and hip bone is filled with meat and fat. The short rib ends cannot be felt.

Your target is a score 3 but, if your sheep is “dry” (ie you are not intending to breed), a body condition score in the range 2.5 to 4 is fine. If you are intending to breed, the closer you can get to score 3 throughout the pregnancy the better. Less than 2.5 and the ewe will have problems feeding the lamb. A score 4 or higher and there is a significant risk of dystocia (ie the lamb getting stuck during birth).

The two most common causes of skinny sheep on hobby farms are underfeeding and worm disease. When sheep fall below condition score 2, their health and welfare are seriously compromised. If you see skinny sheep, please report to DPIPWE on 1300 368 550 or the RSPCA on 1300 139 947.

**Please note: when handfeeding extensive sheep flocks in drought conditions, a condition score of 2 is an acceptable target providing there is no intention to breed from the sheep. But maintaining sheep in this “store condition” requires considerable skill and it is strongly recommended that hobby farmers do not attempt it. Stay within scores 2.5 to 4 and you minimise the risk of health and welfare problems.*

The body condition score chart and both pictures courtesy of the West Australian Department of Primary Industries.