Winter Nutrition

Make necessary adjustments to cow herd nutrition to compensate for winter’s cold.

by KATIE ALLEN, K-State Research & Extension

High daily temperatures at 20°-30° F confirm the arrival of winter. A week or more of cold temperatures, particularly below freezing, can take a toll on the cow herd. A bodily response to cold stress in cattle is an increase in dry-matter intake (DMI), said Dale Blasi, professor and beef cattle extension specialist for Kansas State University (K-State).

Blasi recommends that cattle producers, if they haven’t already, make a list of the forages they have available for the winter months, know the quality of those forages, take a look at the body condition and hair coat condition of each cow, and prepare for winter winds by providing shelters or windbreaks for the herd.

Forage testing can help determine the quality of the forages producers have on hand, Blasi said. During a string of days with subfreezing temperatures, the higher-quality forages should be used to increase the herd’s caloric intake, but producers should keep in mind that, depending on the harshness of winter, increased animal requirements might continue well into spring.

“Especially with those spring-calving cows, they are starting to enter into their third phase of gestation,” Blasi said. “We have to make sure we keep those pregnancies as healthy as possible.”

If producers are feeding a coproduct such as distillers’ dried grain, Blasi said, they would provide some additional protein and fat to the cows. Providing more corn to the herd is fine to a certain level.

“You get too much corn into the diet, you start to impact the rumen’s ecosystem and you start to hurt the fiber-digesting capability of the lower-quality forages being consumed,” Blasi said. “My recommendation is not more than a half of a percent of the animal’s weight. So, a 1,000-lb. cow you would not feed more than 5 pounds [of additional corn]. Make sure there is adequate protein coming elsewhere so you’re not driving a protein-limiting ecosystem.”

Body condition and hair coat
Assessing the body condition and hair coat for each cow in the herd can help producers determine how much more energy requirements are needed in the winter months. According to Blasi, “A well-known phenomenon with feeding pregnant beef cows is that feeding them in the afternoon and evening hours has a corresponding effect on calving in daylight hours.”

Editor’s Note: Katie Allen is a communications specialist for News Media and Marketing Services within K-State Research & Extension.