

Keep an Eye on Wet Cows

Cows may need extra attention in rainy weather, says a University of Missouri (MU) beef specialist. Prolonged wet weather, even with warm temperatures, can cause more stress on cows than a zero-degree day that is sunny and dry.

Critical stress can start at 59° F if the cow has a wet hair coat and does not have a heavy winter coat, says Don Spiers, MU livestock physiologist.

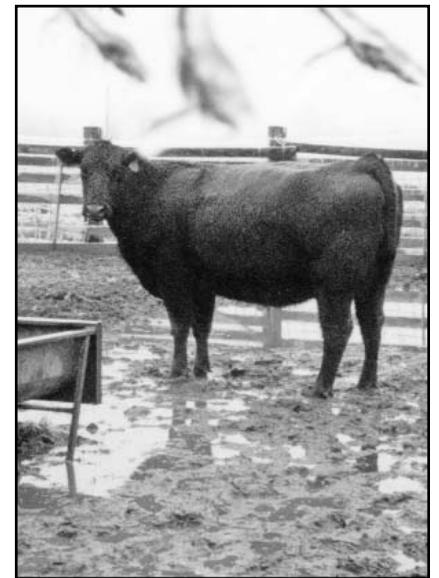
“Wet hair doesn’t provide necessary insulation,” says Spiers, explaining that

wet cattle are more subject to wind chill. Cold cattle require more energy in their diets to prevent loss of body condition as they go into winter.

“Cows can withstand very cold weather, but not if they are wet,” he says.

The concern arose as Missouri had unusually wet weather in fall 2004. “Both October and November were among the 10 wettest for those months on record in over a century,” says Pat Guinan, climatologist with the MU Commercial Agriculture program.

“We’re setting up conditions to see a lot of weak-calf syndrome [in the] spring,” says David Patterson, MU Extension beef reproduction specialist. “Cows in lowered body condition scores (BCS) have more difficulty at calving time.”



MU livestock physiologist Don Spiers says wet hair doesn’t provide cows with necessary insulation. Wet cattle are more subject to wind chill. [PHOTOS BY SUSAN COON]

Normally spring-calving cows that are gestating during the winter can thrive on stockpiled pastures, possibly supplemented with hay, until they calve in the spring.

Sometimes a grain ration supplement is needed just before calving so the cow will produce plenty of milk for the newborn calf.

“This year the cows may need a little supplement each day, starting earlier than usual,” Patterson says, adding cows will need a ration with energy, rather than with more protein. “It is easier and cheaper to maintain body condition than it is to try to put it back on just before calving.”

A good year to test hay

Rob Kallenbach, MU Extension forage specialist, says, “If there was ever a year to get a forage test, this is the year.” Forage testing labs can give a detailed analysis of the nutrient and protein content of hay samples.

“A lot of very low-quality hay was put up this year because of prolonged rainy weather during haying season last spring,” Kallenbach says. “Some of the hay that was finally put up might not have very much energy left in it.”

“The cows may be eating a lot of hay, but they aren’t getting very much nutrition.”

Stockpiled fescue pastures are providing better nutrition than the hay, Kallenbach says. Recent forage tests on samples from pastures at the MU

Forage Systems Research Center at Linneus show protein content above 18%, more than a gestating cow needs.

Kent Haden, vice president of livestock operations of MFA Inc., Columbia, said he was receiving reports from fieldmen who were seeing a drop in the BCS of cow herds across Missouri in late November.

At the time, Haden encouraged cattlemen to look at their cattle closely, especially when the cattle were wet, which can help reveal poor condition. "A winter hair coat can hide their condition," he says.

Haden says that another way to check body condition is in a livestock chute. "If you run your hands over their sides or down their back and can feel their ribs or backbone sticking out, they are not in good condition."

Body condition, mainly an appraisal of the fat layer on a cow, is rated on a scale of 1 to 9. Cows should be in a BCS 6 going into the winter (see "The Stockman's Eye," beginning on page 34, for tips, including photos, on how to score your cows).

"It is easy to overestimate the body condition of a pregnant cow because of her increasing size," Patterson says.

Cows that calve in low body condition are less likely to rebreed, Patterson adds. Normally, a cow pulls energy reserves from stored body fat to produce milk for the calf and still be in condition to conceive for the coming year.



In rainy weather, cattle with wet hair need more energy to maintain condition and prepare for spring calving.

In a similar season in the 1990s, as many as 50% of cows in many herds failed to rebreed because of lowered BCS.

A thin cow will divert all of her energy to supporting her calf. Patterson recalls a similar season in the early 1990s. Then, as many as 50% of cows in many herds failed to rebreed because of lowered BCS.

"We have lots of byproduct feeds available that make good supplements," Kallenbach says. A few pounds of distiller's grain from a corn ethanol plant or a ration of soy hulls can be used. While shelled corn is an inexpensive ration, too much corn can upset the digestion of forage in a cow's rumen.

"The main thing is to check cows now and add supplement as needed," Patterson says.

MU Extension regional livestock specialists can help producers formulate a ration supplement, based on the forage quality available.



Editor's Note: This article was written by Duane Dailey, senior writer for MU Extension & Ag Information, which supplied this article.