

HEALTH & HUSBANDRY

Winterize your herd

by Brad White, Kansas State University, Beef Cattle Institute



Regardless of how much fun it is to procrastinate, colder weather is just around the corner. I will

likely still be surprised the first day the hose freezes because I left it attached to the hydrant overnight, but there is no need for surprises with your herd this winter.

Planning for winter is not about maintaining status quo. Rather, it's about laying a foundation for a successful spring. Creating a strategy for feeding and housing prior to winter promotes animal health next year.

Feeding strategy

Feed cost represents the largest variable cost in cow-calf operations, and most expenses are incurred with winter feeding. Matching feedstuff quality to cow nutritional requirements is important to optimize utilization of available resources.

Spring-calving cows are in the second trimester of pregnancy and not lactating entering winter.

This is a great time to consider supplementing cows with lower body condition scores (BCS), as they are at the production cycle low of their nutritional needs.

Feeding in separate groups based on BCS can be labor-intensive; however, the increase in efficiency may be worthwhile, and the separation does not have to be season-long. Feeding low-BCS cows separately for a few months can result in a dramatic change in body condition, then the herd can be fed as a larger group for the rest of the winter.

The goal is creating a herd with a good BCS by the time of calving to increase the likelihood of rebreeding in a timely fashion for

the subsequent year.

In addition to creating a strategy to manage thin cows, also consider the best allocation of available feedstuffs. In many areas of the country, hay is in short supply this fall, resulting in producers procuring hay of varied quantity and quality. Match the ration to cow nutritional needs.

Early winter is a good time to use lower-quality hay. Supplementation with additional feedstuffs can stretch the hay supply further into spring. This can be more effective if done in small amounts throughout rather than trying to catch up at the end of the period. Consult with your nutritionist or extension office to help form a plan at the start of winter that will help optimize hay resources through the winter.

A prewinter feeding plan is useful,

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but weather and other events change during the feeding period, and monitoring cow body condition is important. Hay tests reveal the expected nutrient density. However, the true test is monitoring how much hay is delivered and changes in body condition.

Cow body condition lags behind nutrient deficiency or overabundance. Keep a close eye on potential changes in cow condition to identify discrepancies early.

Housing strategy

Protection from the elements during winter months can be important in many regions of the country, but consider planning for



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the problem that usually does not come out in full force until spring: mud. It's not a friend to cattle or cattlemen.

Mud makes most tasks harder, and it is detrimental to animal well-being and health. Preventing mud is not possible, but a mud management plan is better achieved in the months prior to winter, rather than after mud is present.

One reason to consider mud management is the effect on nutritional requirements. Cattle spending time in mud have increased nutritional needs. For spring-calving cows near their peak nutritional requirements, this can amplify the negative energy balance.

Creating a feeding and loafing area that minimizes mud is important. This area may need to be prepared this fall to promote drainage or create a solid base.

Additionally, determining alternative feeding areas can be useful.

Mud and environmental management are associated with the prevention of calf scours. Calf scours (diarrhea) is caused by several bacterial and viral pathogens that reside within the animals through the winter. Clinically normal animals shed small quantities of these pathogens, but even

these can be concentrated in the environment in high areas of animal congregation.

Once a calf becomes infected, this animal sheds vastly more of the pathogens and can lead to further environmental contamination. The pathogens started in the animal, but the environment quickly becomes the primary source of infection, and young calves can be presented with a large challenge.

Planning to decrease the environmental challenge is based on a couple relatively simple concepts:

- ▶ dilution is the solution to pathogen pollution, and
- ▶ clean calving environments present fewer challenges.

The first concept is about spreading the feces through the pasture. In many operations hay feeding and water are in close proximity. Even in larger pastures, cattle may not travel too far from these sources. Providing separation between hay and water can be helpful to spread animal concentration and feces across a larger area.

Providing alternative water sources is more challenging, but now is a good time to consider alternative feeding areas to decrease the concentration of

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animals in one area of the pasture.

Clean calving environments present fewer challenges. Rarely do the first few calves born in a calving season succumb to calf scours. Most problems appear in the later-born calves.

The Sandhills Calving System is based on the concept of providing a new environment for calves born every few weeks. While having this many calving pastures is not feasible for many operations, a modified approach can achieve many of the benefits by having at least a couple calving pastures, depending on herd size and calving distribution.

For example, all cattle could start in a primary pasture. After the first three to four weeks of calving, the cows that have not calved could be moved to a smaller, but unused, pasture to begin calving. Therefore, in the new pasture, the calving season starts fresh and these calves are at much lower risk for scours.

Environmental management can be one of the most effective

tools to combat calf scours, but it requires planning to prepare the appropriate number of pastures. Now is the time to consider managing water and fencing needs.

Conclusions

Winter is an important time to prepare the cow herd for spring success. Maintaining an optimal balance between feed resources and cow body condition requires a plan for feedstuff allocation through the period. Preparing the environment to minimize issues with animal health may require modifications to the fencing and water that may be more readily achieved prior to winter. ■

Editor's note: "Health & Husbandry" is a regular *Angus Beef Bulletin* column devoted to the care and well-being of the herd. Author Brad White is on faculty at Kansas State University College of Veterinary medicine and serves as director of the Beef Cattle Institute. To learn more on this and other beef herd health topics, tune in to the weekly Beef Cattle Institute *Cattle Chat* podcast available on iTunes, GooglePlay or directly from KSUBCI.org.