

# THE TALE OF TWO WINTERS

Tips from cattlemen who have “been there, done that” with winter weather in the north and south.

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

**I**n some parts of the country, winter weather is part of the code. It’s expected, regular and often unrelenting. For many cattlemen, it’s just part of what they do for a season. They’re well-outfitted and prepped for storms because of their frequent occurrence.

In other parts, ranchers are more accustomed to dealing with heat stress and drought. When winter dips that far south, it is not a familiar guest.

This is the tale of two winters, and what cattlemen across the country can learn from experience.

## ‘More costly than Harvey’

The Winter Outbreak that occurred on Valentine’s Week 2021 brought not only snow, sleet, and freezing rain to Southeast Texas, but also extreme cold temperatures that lasted for

several days. This was one of the most impactful winter events in recent history that brought multiday road closures, power outages, loss of heat, broken pipes, and other societal impacts for the region. While the damage is still being assessed, this will likely go down as the first billion-dollar disaster of 2021 globally, and potentially the most costly weather disaster for the state of Texas in history, surpassing even Hurricane Harvey from 2017.

That’s how the National Weather Service described the snowstorm

that hit south Texas earlier this year.

“All of Texas was tested,” says Katy Kemp, who experienced it firsthand at her family ranch near Staples, Texas. They got through calving during the first wave of the blizzard, then the second proved to be worse than predicted.

“You just sort of felt the air leave the room,” she says.

“It was a 100-year freeze. For our part of the world, located in south-central Texas, you can freeze, but it’s rare that it ever freezes longer than 12 hours,” Kemp says. “We don’t winterize to the same extent as even north Texas or the Panhandle.”

Weather forecasts suggested it would be a strong winter storm, but it underestimated snowfall totals and the amount of time the region would spend at or below zero.

Their electricity surged in and out, then eventually went all the way out. Gas heaters failed, and aboveground pipes and the pump froze. When the thaw came, a flooded well house revealed busted main mechanisms.

“There are days that it’s not fun to work in ag. Normally you get to come in and get a hot shower, and you can recharge,” Kemp says,

noting this wasn’t like that. “There is no hot water, no electricity.”

A couple hundred miles north near Archer City, Texas, Doug and Jill Dunkel watched the forecast and made plans. Doug was raised

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in Nebraska, and Jill hails from the Panhandle, so they'd encountered this weather before. They felt prepared, but it quickly became clear the Texas infrastructure was not.

"That's what made this whole storm even more of a challenge," says Jill Dunkel, who watched over the horses and the commercial cow-calf herd around the house while her husband managed their stocker operation 30 miles away. Many people were without power and water for extended periods of time. "That led to getting creative."

At one point, every single county in Texas was under a Winter Storm Warning.

### What they did, and what they'll do differently

"We filled up our bathtubs full of water in case we lost electricity," Dunkel says, "I could still wash dishes and flush the toilet, and that proved to be invaluable because we didn't have water at our house for five or six days."

A pressure problem in their rural water district left them without, but a neighbor up the road invited them to fill 5-gallon buckets from the shower. Dunkel packed every cooler she owned in the bed of the pickup, hand-filled them, and manually watered horses and cattle in corrals.

"If you had your house hooked up to a generator, that was great until you couldn't get gas for that generator," she says, explaining what many friends went through.

Gas stations were



Winter doesn't visit south Texas in the form of snow and Winter Storm Warnings very often, so the Kemp family improvised by bringing calves into lean-tos and feeding extra energy.



without power themselves, so it was often hard to find fuel.

Those who drove a diesel in south Texas found themselves in a new scenario: The diesel gelled.

"We were down two diesel trucks; the feedtruck was down," Kemp says.

They relied on a tractor kept in the shed and her sister's gas pickup to get to town for anti-gel. That

memory will likely spur them to keep a jug of additive on hand from now on "just in case."

Many stored refrigerated food outside, lit fires inside and cooked on gas grills. Power grid failures closed grocery stores; but for most, keeping the cattle fed and watered was priority No. 1.

Human comforts could wait.

"When the rain hit and we didn't warm up and we didn't dry out before it got cold again, we just had to pour so much more energy into everything because they were cold and wet," Kemp says. "We went through more feed and more hay than we anticipated."

They brought pairs into bedded lean-tos when possible, but found the older calves who wandered farther from their

Jill Dunkel had filled the bathtubs with water in case the electricity went out. However, every cooler she owned quickly became "Plan B" for watering her horses.

mothers seemed to suffer the most. They bottle-fed 2-month-olds.

Getting "stock tanks" (often known as ponds to those outside the Lone Star state) cleared so cattle could drink was a challenge.

"I would move the snow to try to figure out, am I on the dirt or am I on the ice?" Dunkel recalls. "It was difficult to figure out where your ground ended, and the cattle just got disoriented and would walk and fall in. There were a lot of losses."

Dunkel feels fortunate their count was just four.

"We'd just chop ice on the edge in lots of places just to help them find where the water was, because I think they were mainly looking for water," she says.

At the stocker operation, her husband left the water running

over to keep the automatic waterers from freezing. That worked until a power failure and the pumps stopped. Plan B was letting the cattle out in one big herd with access to a stock tank.

"We had a lot of 'what ifs,' and we had a plan," Dunkel says.

They did little things like stack hay bales along the north wall of their kitchen to safeguard pipes, and they charged all their portable

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— Jill Dunkel



PHOTO COURTESY OF JILL DUNKEL

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATY KEMP



battery packs to power cellphones.

Looking back, Kemp says, if they face a similar situation down the road, they'll be more prepared. They made notes, like keeping spare parts or PVC pipe around for the well and stocking more milk replacer and pellets. They're looking into the feasibility of investing in another generator, and they'll be prepared for an event lasting longer than 24-48 hours.

"That expectation factor can really mentally drain you," Kemp says.

### Meanwhile, up north ...

Cattlemen in colder climates have the advantage of experience and investments in equipment and facilities. Large-scale generators and backup plans are the norm.

Preparing for winter is a year-round task, says Bruce Edgar, Rockham, S.D., Angus breeder.

Calving season starts in January, so summer finds him, his sons and their employees doing more extensive work on the barn; putting up feed and bedding; and, perhaps most importantly, getting the mamas all set.

"[We're] preconditioning the cow, getting all of her shots, getting her ready. Mineral's important, but we really like these early calvers to [be in] good condition," he says.

They keep cows in groups of 100 or fewer and preg-check by ultrasound so they can sort according to expected calving date. Using a hair bleach, all the cows with due dates in the same month are painted the same. January cows get a bleach mark on the shoulder, March on the rib, and so on.

"Everything gets written down also, but when you're sorting, you're not sitting there with a paper and pencil," he says.

As calves are weaned in the fall, the pregnant cows are grouped by those markings.

When it's time to calve, almost every head goes through the barn — an open-front shelter for the older cows and individual stalls in an enclosed space for the first-calf heifers.

"Cornstalks are by far the best bedding. It lasts quite a bit longer," Edgar explains, noting the stalks allow double the amount of time between cleanings as compared to when using straw.

The main goal is to have calves dried off and suckling before they move outdoors.

"The biggest thing to make



sure is that calf has good circulation," Edgar says. "If you stick your finger in the calf's mouth and his tongue's cold, he's got a problem. You know he's not feeling good."

An investment in calving cameras pays off in fewer trips to the barn, which is better for the animals, too. He suggests fewer interruptions during the calving process tend to make it go more smoothly.

After a week, calves are sexed and pairs moved to specific pastures with good windbreaks and access to more bedding.



Bruce Edgar says preparing for a South Dakota winter is a year-round process, making sure cows are in good condition, harvesting bedding and feed, and making sure facilities are ready to shelter new calves.

many calves it's saved over the years, but it's fair to say it's paid for itself, Edgar says.

Good employees are worth the investment, too. "If you think you have enough hired help, hire one more," he says.

Edgar remembers a bad winter in the late 1990s when the road to his son's house didn't open up for a month. Yet the worst single-incident disaster was in 2019. A March "bomb cyclone" hit South Dakota, and the swift severe weather caught some older pairs off guard. They drifted away from the sheltered barn area over a fence and into a creek.

"We were just throwing calves in the back of the Ranger and hauling them back to the barn," he says. "It was a sad deal."

Sometimes there's nothing a producer can do, but when they can take action, they must, Edgar says.

"As long as those calves and cows have good feed in them and are in good condition, they can take a lot of weather," he says.

That's as true a statement in South Dakota as it is in Texas — or anywhere in between. |

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— Bruce Edgar