



Beef Talk

by **KRIS RINGWALL**, *Extension beef specialist, North Dakota State University*

Don't overlook the value of hair

Health can never be underestimated. Having been confined lately, that concept is even more appreciated. Comfort, the lack of stress and the need to allow time for recovery are important.

All three factors also are part of cattle management, so appropriate managerial reactions must be thought through. One concept often overlooked in good cow health is hair.

Cow comfort and stress are related to how a cow or calf is clothed. Many studies have been done on hair coat, but most are on how cattle survive in hot climates rather than in cold. Regardless, hair in cold climates is important.

Notably, in northern climates we all can appreciate those days when everything is covered with frost. What becomes obvious very quickly are those buildings that have adequate insulation and those that do not.

A heated building with minimal or no insulation will shed frost quickly because heat loss from the inside prevents frost from gathering on the roof. A quick look

at rooftops and one can tell which homes are efficient to heat.

The same is true of the beef herd. Healthy cattle will tend to not have frost on their backs, even when the weather gets very cold. A well-fed cow produces a lot of heat, particularly when she is fed high-roughage feedstuffs.

However, as the weather gets colder, the frost eventually settles in. Well-insulated cows, just like well-insulated homes, will look like walking frost balls. The hair protects the body from the devastating cold that confronts us all.

Inside, underneath that winter coat of hair, is a very warm, comfortable cow that really is not stressed at all by the cold outside. She doesn't need to depend on constant eating. Instead, she eats what she needs and returns to a protected, comfortable spot on the range where she

quietly ruminates and waits for the warm days of spring.

That is in contrast to thin, poorly conditioned cattle that have not developed a good coat of hair. They are not comfortable, are stressed and are forced to eat more feed to maintain body temperature.

We don't need fancy technology to understand if our cows are comfortable or stressed. The simple things in life often tell us the most, and good managers know the signs.

How cattle respond to the cold is part of that equation. Cattle that don't respond well need to be watched for and moved to the sale pen so they may be offered to someone who lives in a better-suited environment.

Some time ago, one of our dogs, an Australian shepherd, caught an old

antelope doe. Having caught up with the dog and reminding her that she should not be catching antelope, I prepared to release the doe.

What was interesting was the antelope's remarkable coat of hair. Not only did the hair protect her from the dog, it also became very obvious that there probably isn't a winter tough enough to freeze a well-fed antelope. Two layers thick, the outer and inner layers actually were interlocked and the fibers provided a solid outside cover. The antelope depended on her coat for survival.

Cows are domestic animals that rely on human caretakers. As caretakers, we need to remain aware of the natural traits livestock have.

We tend and keep those traits front and center for our profit and for the benefit, comfort and well-being of the cattle. Hair may not seem like a big deal, but when it comes to the environment, it means survival.



Editor's Note: *Addressing the past, present and future state of the beef cattle business, "Beef Talk" is a weekly column distributed by the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Agricultural Communication office. Ringwall is executive secretary of the NDBCIA, director of the Dickinson Research Extension Center and an NDSU Extension beef specialist. An archive of columns can be found at www.BeefTalk.com, and your comments are always welcome.*