

Beef Cattle Winter Water Needs Complicated This Year

MT. VERNON, MO.

Many area ponds are low due to the short rainfall during 2012. As cold weather approaches and shallow ponds freeze, there is concern among cattle producers about meeting the water needs of their cattle.

“Some farmers are already hauling water so it’s a good idea to know how much water different classes of cattle need each day,” said Eldon Cole, a livestock specialist with University of Missouri Extension.

Water requirements vary depending on the cattle’s size, lactation status, ration they are eating and ambient temperature. Growing heifers, steers and bulls weighing 600 pounds require 5.3 gallons of water a day when the average ambient temperature is 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

As the temperature goes up to 50 degrees, water needs increase slightly to 5.8 gallons per head per day. Intake at temperatures below 40 degrees does not change much.

Pregnant cows need 6 to 6.5 gallons at 40 degrees. Following calving, those same cow’s intake for water jumps to roughly 11.5 gallons per day at 40 degrees and 12.6 gallons at 50 degrees.

Mature bulls require around 8.5 gallons per day at 40 degrees and below needs increase to 9.4 gallons per head at 50 degrees.

According to Cole, the moisture level of an animal’s diet varies and that can influence actual water intake.

“A lot of high moisture haylage and silage will be fed in the coming months. The haylage may contain 50 percent moisture and an animal eating 25 pounds of it per day will consume about 12.5 pounds of moisture. This reduces the actual water need by about 1.5 gallons,” said Cole.

Silage contains around 65 to 70 percent moisture and intake by cows may run in the 40 to 50 pound per day range, or even more. That adds up to over 30 pounds of moisture which amounts to nearly 4 gallons of water.

“In some areas cattle may be grazing pasture that contains around 50 percent moisture that helps reduce the actual gallons per day required,” said Cole.

Cattle are sometimes given a supplement containing 10 to 30 percent plain white salt that allows them to be self-fed. Under these conditions, cattle may drink 50 percent or more

water so be certain ponds, streams or other water sources provide ample water.

“Frozen water is less a concern now than in years gone by, thanks to the large number of automatic waterers we now see in pastures. If you still rely on ponds, make sure after a cold snap that cattle have access to water daily,” said Cole. △



Three yearlings drink from an old-fashioned heated waterer.
Photo by Eldon Cole, MU Extension.



A calf visits a pond on a wintry morning only to find it frozen over.
Photo by Eldon Cole, MU Extension.