

Winter Considerations For Beef Cattle



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The air is cool and crisp with decreasing daylight, which means that Old Man Winter is fast approaching. Although winter has not officially begun, and above-average temperatures have been predicted for this winter, it is an opportune time for

beef producers to think about what it will take to get their herd through the winter months. Winter feed costs are the single largest expense in a beef operation. So, it is important to decide in advance what feedstuffs will be fed, the nutritional quality of those feedstuffs and the approximate quantity of feedstuffs needed until spring. It is especially important to know quality of the feedstuffs to assist in developing balanced rations to meet the cow's needs.

A cow needs the correct level of nutrients to at least maintain her body weight during winter. Heading into the winter months, cows should have a body condition scoring (BCS) of 5 to 6 (where 1 is emaciated and 9 is obese). Optimally, this body condition should be maintained throughout winter, regardless of their diet. Cows entering the winter months thin will be affected by cold stress more than cows of moderate to good body condition. Increasing the cow's body condition prior to winter can provide a valuable "cushion" for times of increased energy needs. Loss of too much body condition can significantly impact the following: calves may be born weak; colostrum production may be inadequate in amount and/or quality, which can compromise calf survival; and the postpartum

interval may be lengthened.

Keeping warm is the largest part of cattle's maintenance requirements in the winter, and cattle will use available nutrients for maintenance before fulfilling any other needs. If adequate nutrition is not provided, cows will pull energy from body fat reserves to keep warm. Thus, cows must be supplied with enough protein and energy to meet their maintenance requirements, as well as additional nutrients to support fetal development and lactation.

Consider the following: the lower critical temperature (LCT) for cows in adequate body condition with a normal, dry winter coat is approximately 32° F. Below 32° F, the amount of energy needed by the cow for maintenance begins to increase. However, if the hair coat is wet, maintenance requirements are at a much higher temperature of 60° F. Thus, a cow's nutritional requirement increases as the temperature decreases or on windy days, but is impacted even more if she becomes wet due to rain or snow. These numbers can be affected, towards the good, if windbreaks, shelters or bedding are provided during winter.

Not only do cattle need adequate feed during the winter, but it is vital that they have plenty of water available, whether they are drinking from a fountain-type waterer or a pond. Closely monitor your cows throughout winter. If some start to lose weight, you can quickly intervene by providing supplemental feed. Frequent monitoring, common sense and practical animal husbandry will bring your cattle through the winter in fine shape. Δ

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