Winter Has A Large Impact On Cow-Calf Operations

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Winter officially runs from December 21 to March 21. Depending on the weather, sometimes it starts earlier and other times later, and it may even extend past March 21. Regardless of when it starts or ends, it is the period in the cow-calf's annual production cycle that has a large effect on profitability of the operation.

From a financial standpoint, expenses incurred during the winter make up a large percentage of the variable cost of producing a weaned calf. Feeding calves harvested forages is the reason for the high cost. Some reports indicate that winter feed bill can make up 35 to 45 percent of the annual variable costs. Hay is the winter feed for 92 percent of Tennessee's cow-calf producers.

Lots of the hay harvested is lost or wasted during storing and feeding. Bales stored outside on the ground and uncovered can lose up to 40 percent of the harvested hay, which in turn increases the winter feed bill by 40 percent. Wait, there is more! If the cattle are allowed unlimited access to the bales during feeding, another 30to 40 percent of the hay is wasted, increasing total feed cost and shrinking profitability. Feeding hay in rings can reduce losses during feeding from 2 to 6 percent. Providean adequate number of rings so that all cattle can have access to the hay. When not enough rings and spaces are provided, the old and young cattle stand in line waiting their turn to the hay. When they do make it to the ring, they find that higher quality hay has been consumed and the lower quality forage is what's left.

Observe your feeding program this winter. Check for the spoilage or waste that occurred during storage. If you have some of the hay crop covered, off the ground or in a hay storage shed, you will see the losses are a lot less. Wasted hay is wasted profit.

In addition, the majority of the herds in Tennessee calve during the winter months when stresses of cold and precipitation contribute to reduced calf survival. Calves come into the world with a wet coat into a significantly cooler temperature than they are used to. This temperature drop can be quite a shock on the newborn animal. Contact with the cold ground, mud and snow will rapidly chill the calves. However, calf survival can be improved if the dam is in a body condition of 5 or better when the calf is born. If born to cows in a BCS of 5 and first-calf heifers in a BCS of 6, the calves' survival will be improved as well as future performance. Calves can generate some heat by shivering or draw from brown fat stores in the body. The availability of brown fat in the newborn calves will be directly related to the dams' BCS at calving. BCS of the dam is also related to colostrum quality and volume. A lot has been written and taught about the influence of the dam's BCS on subsequent reproduction. But it also impacts survival of the current calf crop and performance of future calf crop. It pays to keep the dams in the appropriate body condition.

Winter is a critical time for Tennessee cow-calf producers. It is expensive to feed the herd and it can also impact both future and current calf crop performance and eventually profitability. Δ

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