

Managing Winter Weather Shifts

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New decade, same Mississippi weather. One of the joys of living in the south is the short, mild winters we experience compared to other parts of the country. However, this time of year we often get to live through that running joke of experiencing all of the seasons in a week. Drastic temperature and precipitation swings brought on by cold fronts sweeping through our part of the country this time of year are common. While we had a nice warm house to huddle in for that day of freezing rain, our cattle are typically not so fortunate. A little forward planning can go a long way toward keeping cattle healthy and happy during these drastic shifts in weather we often experience in these winter months.

The 2020 Weather Outlook in the Farmer’s Almanac predicts brisk and wet weather for the southeast this winter. Neither of these conditions spells comfortable for cattle, in fact cold and wet is no fun for anyone! There are several points to consider that can make these temperature and weather swings more comfortable for the cowherd. Food, water, and shelter, are of key consideration this time of year.

Cold weather causes an increase in maintenance requirements. This is because as temperatures decrease below the lower critical temperature of an animal’s thermoneutral zone, heat produced from normal bodily functions is insufficient to maintain body temperature. Ultimately this means that cattle need to eat more when it’s cold out in order to stay warm and healthy. Providing free-choice access to hay is important during this time, as well as access to mineral and a supplement dependent on hay quality. Pay close attention to weather forecasts, and be sure to resupply hay in advance of extreme weather shifts.

While cattle can adapt to weather conditions by growing a winter coat (yes, even Brahms will grow a little winter shag), the combination of cold with wet conditions can negate the effectiveness of that hard grown coat. Too often in Mississippi, January and February bring a combination of cold and wet conditions, which are hard on cattle, and especially newborn calves. Provide cattle with windbreaks or shelter belts such as stands of trees to block wind and precipitation when possible. While access to a barn or covered shelter may seem like a good idea, cattle are less likely to utilize these enclosed covered spaces compared to natural shelter options.

Providing access to mud free areas is also a key management strategy. Calves born in muddy conditions may experience fatal cold stress so monitoring calving areas early and often is an important practice. Be sure that calves dry off quickly and receive colostrum within the first 12 hours of birth. Often calves use hay feeding areas as a warm place free from wind, however, these high traffic areas are often muddy, and their high traffic nature leads to increased incidence of new calves being crushed or trampled. Keeping a close eye on calving pastures during temperature swings critical. In addition, these muddy areas can harbor pathogens that can lead to sickness in newborn calves.

An average estimate for hay intake is 2.5% of an animal’s body weight of dry matter per day. Use this rule of thumb to monitor hay supplies, and if necessary search for a high fiber feedstuff that can serve as a replacement for hay. Several products are available, and determining which

best fits your farm is dependent on location and storage capability. In addition, monitoring feed supplies is also important. If cattle are running low on hay supplies, increasing energy intake may serve to spare some hay, but this is a short term solution. Pay close attention to body condition scores (particularly for spring calving herds), and increase supplementation if sharp declines in body conditions are noted.

Precipitation (in liquid or frozen state) is not the only water we should be concerned with during winter months. In addition, it is important to monitor access to drinking water for cattle in the winter months. This may mean breaking ice on trough surfaces. If watering from ponds in winter months, closely monitor cattle access points. If cattle must travel into extreme muddy areas or step into ponds to water this may be cause for concern. In addition, preparing water lines for freezing events is key. This may mean insulating exposed lines or simply cutting off water supplies during periods of freezing temperatures.

Remember thinking ahead can often save much headache when it comes to preparing for winter weather shifts. Monitoring cattle, feed and water supplies are critical at this time. Planning ahead can often save several hours spent out in the cold! Stay warm this winter!

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit extension.msstate.edu/beef.