

Managing Winter Weather Shifts

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One of the joys of living in the south is the often mild winters we experience. However, as I write this article, we've currently just experienced one of the weather swings that Mississippi is famous for. A Friday of temperatures hovering in the upper 30's to low 40's to a Saturday of almost 80° to a Sunday of freezing rain and sleet. 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 2017 Weather Outlook in the Farmer's Almanac predicts penetrating cold and very wet weather for the southeast this winter. Neither of these conditions spells comfortable for cattle. There are several points to consider that can make these temperature and weather swings more comfortable for the cowherd. Feed and nutrient requirements are a key consideration along with water, and muddy conditions.

Cold weather causes an increase in cattle's 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 is important, as well as access to mineral and protein and energy supplements 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, 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.

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.

The recent drought has left many producers without an ample supply of hay, and typical early access to winter grazing. This means that many producers will rely heavily on supplementation programs, and in some cases hay replacement options. 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.

Water (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 water access for cattle in the winter months. This may mean breaking ice on trough surface. 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.