Cattle Care in Extreme Weather Conditions

Sadly, Punxsutawney Phil, the groundhog saw his shadow which means we still have six more weeks of winter. Even though we are all ready for spring, the ground says we still have several more days of winter ahead. Weather patterns can be unpredictable and change drastically. Not every animal has the opportunity like us humans to retreat to the indoors to stay warm on those blistery cold days. As cattle producers, we need to be prepared for anything and have a plan set in place for when the weather is going to be extreme.

Though cattle are naturally equipped to manage cold temperatures, like humans they need some extra care to make those frigid winter days a little easier. Cattle work to maintain a constant core body temperature of about 101 degrees Fahrenheit. During the winter months, the need for cattle to maintain their core body temperature becomes a challenge and can cause cold stress. If a cow has a clean dry heavy winter coat, she can withstand temperatures below 20 degrees Fahrenheit before feeling any cold stress. Both dairy and beef cattle are incredibly hardy. Cattle can live outside in the winter and do quite well even during winter storms if provided with a few key components.

It all starts with acclimation to the weather, which means that cattle that are expected to live outside during the winter should remain outside. This allows them to adjust to the changing conditions as winter approaches and permits them to grow a thick hair coat in preparation for the cold. Even with a thick coat of hair, protection from wind is the most important factor in the success of cattle riding out severe winter weather. Cattle will naturally seek out windbreaks if one is not provided as they prioritize getting out of the wind over food or water. Some examples of effective windbreaks are stands of trees, stacks of round bales, buildings, or other man-made structures. Windbreaks should be relatively tall, and the material should allow a small amount of wind to pass through.

Creek bottoms, swales, and other similar landscape features can be tempting places to use as windbreaks for cattle. However, the problem with these locations is that they are prime locations for drifting snow. High winds combined with snow can create deep drifts that cause access issues for feeding cattle, seeking out water, and even can lead to the death of cattle from being buried by the snow. It is best to avoid these areas as much as possible and provide them with other options. While some cattle have access to barns or windbreaks, there are times when cattle are out on pasture and those are not options. Producers need to get creative in their thinking to provide protection to those cattle. This can be done by just placing stock trailers to form the windbreak and allowing for a spot to get out of the wind.

After a windbreak, keeping cattle dry is the next most crucial factor for successfully getting through severe winter weather. Building a defined bedded pack behind the windbreak is one of the best ways to provide a dry place for cattle to lay. Packs work best when a reasonably deep absorbent base is used, and a thin layer of new bedding is applied daily. Prevent accumulation of ice as much as possible especially on walking surfaces for both you and the cattle. Consider ruffing up the surface and adding sand or gravel for traction.

Even with all these components in place nutritional maintenance is still highly important for cattle to survive severe winter weather conditions. Nutritionally speaking, beef cattle nutritionist
Phillip Lancaster of the Beef Cattle Institute said, that cattle’s maintenance requirements will increase 50-100 percent when the temperatures plummet and they are out in the frigid, snowy conditions. In extreme cold, cattle require more calories to maintain body condition and stay warm. Remember thinner cows will require more feed during these cold spells to keep their body temperature up. Instead of using a high starch energy source like corn, supplement with distiller’s grains, soybean hulls, or wheat midds to provide energy as these are also highly digestible fibers. When a storm is approaching, place feed behind your windbreak to encourage your cattle to stay there. Often forgotten, water is a key element to the health of your cattle. Without adequate water access, cattle will not eat as much and will lose body condition. Cattle enjoy being dry, warm and having their stomachs full on a snowy day just like any human would. Keeping in mind these few key components can help in the long run with cow comfort as we continue into the winter months. The groundhog might have seen his shadow and six more weeks of winter are upon us, but cattle producers will be ready for the next extreme weather conditions to arrive.

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