



Some herds do well through winter on pasture without additional feed except for a salt or mineral supplement. However, in some instances, cows may need a protein supplement to utilize low-quality forages.



Cold-Weather Cows

Plan ahead for winter management.

by *Heather Smith Thomas*

The season has changed and fall is in full swing. But thinking ahead is something cattlemen do well — now is the time to plan for cold-weather management.

This time of year is a good time to assess body condition of pregnant cows when calves are weaned and to create a plan for providing enough feed or pasture so they can maintain or regain

moderate to good condition before their next calving.

According to James England, DVM, a University of Idaho professor, cows must be in good condition — preferably body condition score (BCS) 6 — to handle cold weather, calving and rebreeding.

“With adequate condition at the start of winter and good maintenance throughout, most

animals winter well,” England says. “Unless there’s adequate nutrition, anything else we do is set up for failure.”

As stated by Robert Callan, DVM, a professor at Colorado State University, “The most important aspect of winter beef cow management is adequate nutrition that will allow cows or heifers to maintain or achieve moderate body condition score — about 5

to 6 on a scale of 9 — throughout winter, as well as meet the demands of pregnancy. In times of severe weather conditions, this means additional nutrients, and in some cases, additional shelter from inclement weather.”

Thin cows cannot handle the stress of bad weather and will, therefore, lose more weight. It takes more feed to put weight back on during cold weather.

Spread out cattle and hay

Having cattle at pasture through winter is healthier for cows and calves the next spring rather than congregating them by feeding hay. When spread out over large areas, they are not exposed to as much

fecal contamination; their intestinal tracts don’t get much buildup of *E. coli* and *Clostridium perfringens*, for instance, both of which can be transmitted later to newborn calves via manure.

If cattlemen must feed hay, they should spread it out in large pastures and change feeding areas daily, rather than congregating cattle in small feeding areas or feeding them day after day in the same area. **HW**





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Low-cost winter grazing alternatives

Some stockmen reduce winter feed costs and labor by relying less on forage that must be hauled to the cows and more on letting cows harvest feed themselves. There are several ways to do this, including stockpiling pastures, windrowing forage for winter use and bale grazing.

“Keeping cows grazing stockpiled or windrowed forages as long as possible and then keeping harvested-forage feeding to a minimum is essential to a low-cost wintering program and profitable cow-calf operation,” says Jim Gerrish, American Grazing Lands Services in May, Idaho.

“Closely monitor cow body condition and then use strategic supplementation to stretch out stockpiled pastures. Even with the relatively high cost of adding protein to the diet, using a supplement to enhance stockpiled pastures or rangeland is almost always a lower-cost option than full feeding hay.”

With stockpiled or windrowed forage, cattle will graze through relatively deep snow to get at it — unless snow

is thickly crusted. There is less waste if portable electric fencing is utilized to move cattle gradually across a field. These methods can stretch harvested feed supplies by lengthening the grazing season, but care must be taken to monitor cattle condition and to make sure cattle have access to water and windbreaks.

The same is true with bale grazing. A calculated number of bales can be placed in rows, with twines removed before wet, freezing weather makes that task difficult. Electric fence allows cattle access, using the next row as a handy place to insert posts rather than trying to drive them into frozen ground.

Some ranchers bale-graze with young stock, too, letting weaned calves and yearlings into each new section first, with dry cows following to clean up the rest of the hay — moving both groups when cows finish their section. Manure is spread over fields uniformly and is a plus for next year’s growing season. **HW**

Cows in poor condition do not have an insulating layer of fat and must rob more of their body reserves to create heat energy to keep warm. They continue to lose weight, and it’s a vicious circle.

It often pays to sort cows into groups according to age and/or body condition, saving higher-quality pasture for heifers and thin or old cows and to let the majority of the herd winter on lesser quality pasture.

To help cattle maintain health and body condition, vaccinations should be up

to date, parasite populations assessed, and cattle dewormed and deloused, if necessary.

Lice can be a serious winter problem in northern climates. Worms can adversely affect performance whenever cattle are intensely managed, grazing the same pastures repeatedly, with the grass contaminated with feces rather than having the cattle spread over arid rangelands.

If lice are a winter problem, the best time to delouse cattle is late fall or early winter before lice begin to increase in numbers. Lice

thrive in cold weather and also have thick hair to hide in — cattle cannot remove them as readily with their rough tongues.

A good kill on lice in early winter, before these parasites affect cattle performance, will generally keep cattle relatively free of these unwanted boarders until spring.

Adjust feed for cold weather

How much hay or supplement a cow needs will depend on weather conditions, age, body condition, available pasture or crop residue,



In winter months, weaned calves need the highest quality feed.

and whether or not cows are still nursing calves or are ready to calve again — needing more nutrition to produce milk and breed back.

Some herds do well through winter on good native pasture without any other feed except for a salt or mineral supplement, especially if they’re dry and not nursing calves. In some

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Sorting cows into groups according to age and/or body condition can help save on winter-feeding costs because the groups can be fed according to their need.

instances, cows may need a protein supplement to utilize low-quality forages. If snow covers grass deeply or weather gets cold, however, they may need hay.

If weather is cold or stormy, cattle will need more energy to maintain body heat. Forages can adequately supply energy because fermentation breakdown

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— Shannon Williams

of roughage in the rumen produces heat. If cattle are not fed additional energy, they metabolize body fat to keep warm and lose weight.

During extremely cold or windy weather, cows should be given all the hay they’ll clean up or a protein supplement on dry pastures to encourage them to eat more. As long as their protein levels are adequate, cows can process sufficient roughage to provide energy and body heat. Good windbreaks during severe weather are also



PHOTO BY JANET JONES

Importance of fall nutrition

Stockmen often underestimate the importance of adequate nutrition in the fall, not paying attention to whether cows are losing or gaining weight. According to Ron Skinner, a veterinarian and cattle breeder in Hall, Mont., about 70% of the open cows in Montana each year are the result of inadequate fall nutrition rather than what they’re fed in the spring before and during breeding.

Fall feed and body condition play large roles in a cow’s ability to have a healthy calf, feed it properly and breed back again. If cows get behind in the fall in body weight

and/or important trace minerals, these deficits have a longer impact than people realize.

Cows need adequate, balanced diets, which may merely mean adding a trace mineral supplement to native pasture or a small amount of good hay or a protein supplement if grass becomes too dry or hay if the grass becomes depleted or snowed under. If the cow is deficient in protein or phosphorus through fall and winter, she won’t rebreed on time after she calves again. **HW**

important to reduce cold stress and energy requirements.

Pay attention to nutritional needs

According to Shannon Williams, Lemhi County Extension educator, University of Idaho,

“Most important in winter cow management is to make sure you are meeting your cows’ nutritional requirements according to where they are in their gestational stage.”

Salt should always be provided, since this is the mineral most lacking in forages. In many geographic locations, forage may also be lacking in copper, selenium or zinc. “Trace mineral status of the cow affects all aspects of reproduction and production, as well as future well-being of her calf,” Williams says.

In a drought, grass may be short on protein and phosphorus. As a general rule, rangeland grasses hold their feed values better through winter than “tame” or irrigated pastures or crop residues. These tame forages lose nutrient value once they dry up or freeze, and cattle generally need supplemental feed like hay, silage, grain, or a protein supplement and mineral mix to complement that type of forage.

If pasture is gone or snowed under and hay is being fed, having cattle in several groups is best to meet their different needs.

“You don’t want to ‘waste’ hay or money by feeding better quality feed than they need,” Williams says. “Cows in early or mid-gestation don’t need your best hay. Save it for later when they are calving or feed

it to heifers and 2-year-olds. The only way to truly know the nutritional value of hay is to have it analyzed in a lab. I’ve seen some ‘ugly’ hay that was high in protein, and some hay with great color that had very little protein.”

Weaned calves need the highest quality feed. Next would be pregnant heifers and 2-year-olds that just weaned off calves. Being a 2-year-old in winter is a critical time; these young cows are still growing and may be pulled down in body condition while nursing their first calves and being pregnant again. If they go into winter thin, they need to catch up in body condition so they can give birth to healthy calves and rebreed on time.

Mature, dry cows can get by on lesser quality forage, whether pasture or hay, until late gestation. They don’t need as much protein or energy because they’re not growing or needing to gain weight.

Adequate protein is crucial during the last 60 days of pregnancy for development of the unborn calf and for the cow’s formulation of colostrum. Timely vaccination with a scour prevention vaccine needs to be administered at this time also if scours are typically a problem in the herd. **HW**

Match cattle to their environment

Probably the most important factor that affects winter cow management is whether cattlemen have selected the type of cattle that do well on their ranch — under their conditions.

Mature cows won’t be thin going into winter if producers have selected for efficient cattle, unless the area had serious drought. Cows that need extra feed to maintain body condition and stay in the herd under normal conditions are not the kind producers want, especially if they are seedstock producers selling genetics to cattlemen who run commercial cattle. These cattlemen want cattle that can make a living without pampering.

If pastures are managed properly — without overgrazing or running out of grass — forage-efficient cows won’t lose weight during fall or winter grazing. They generally gain weight after weaning their calves, going into winter with reserves of fat.

Many factors, including climate, influence a winter-feeding program and whether additional feed besides pasture needs to be provided, but it’s most profitable to match cattle to feed sources rather than to try to create a feeding program to fit cattle that won’t do well in the environment. **HW**



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